

Neurodiversity Ireland Summit

May 17, 2025

Using Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) to Support Gestalt Language Development

Echolalia is the beginning of gestalt language
development

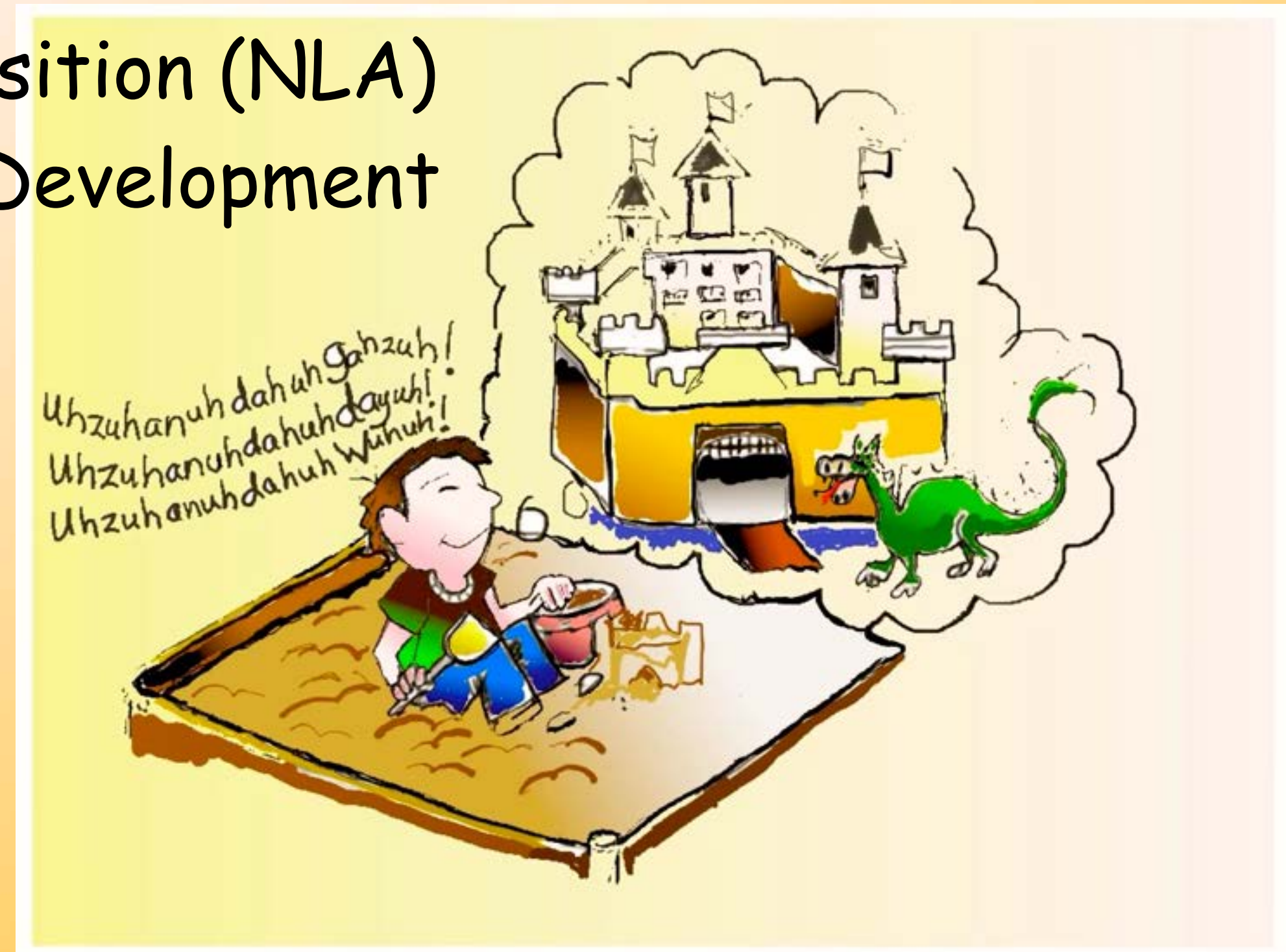
It's not jargon or pathological

So we should not try to 'extinguish' it

Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com

Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum:
the Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language (2012)





Language gestalts are 'delayed echolalia'

They come from a different time and place when we hear
them — so we can be very confused!
But our children are not!





When we acknowledge one gestalt as communication,
our child becomes an instant communicator!



Supporting connection IS supporting communication!





Did our child change?

NO!

We did!





Have you heard anything like this?
Whee, this is fun.🎵 I'm flying!



But let's go back in time: before we learned about "gestalt language processing,"
this echolalic/gestalt language was considered 'jargon' —
or worse

Gibberish **Movie talk** A symptom Self-talk
Meaningless Vocal stereotypy Babbling
Deviant Nonsense
Pre-verbal Just the autism **Off topic**
Non-functional speech **Bizarre** Ideopathic
Media talk Talking to himself Just vocalizing
Non-contextual
In a world of his own Just scripting Repetitive
Non-verbal
Jargon Interference Unrelated Silly talk
Just echolalia Just singing,
not really talking Inappropriate
Pathological Parroting



The old 'pathology' view is now overshadowed by the view through a **neurodiversity lens**.

'Echoing' is language development...**gestalt language development!**





If we recognize its use, we can
sometimes understand why our child is
saying it!
Humpty Dumpty



Language development

There are two kinds of
thinking in childhood

and two kinds of language
development!



"Analytic" (focusing on one small thing)

'ball'





Gestalt (the whole experience):

"And he scores!"



Analytic
means focusing on something specific



The other thinking style is 'gestalt.'
That means seeing the 'big picture'
or the 'whole experience'



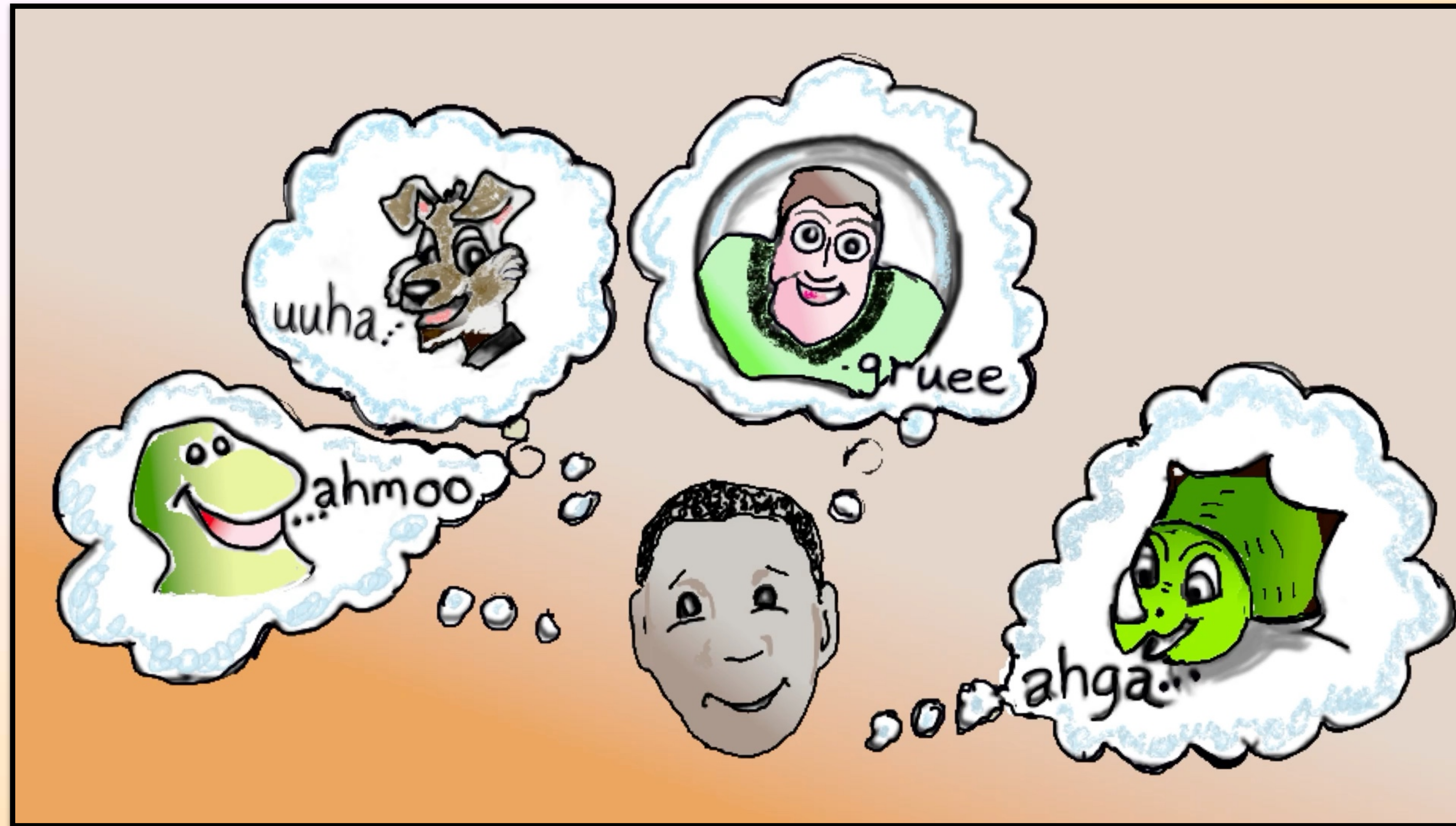
Gestalt thinking is a natural way of thinking ... and
developing language!



And it communicates when we are ready to
accept it and support it...



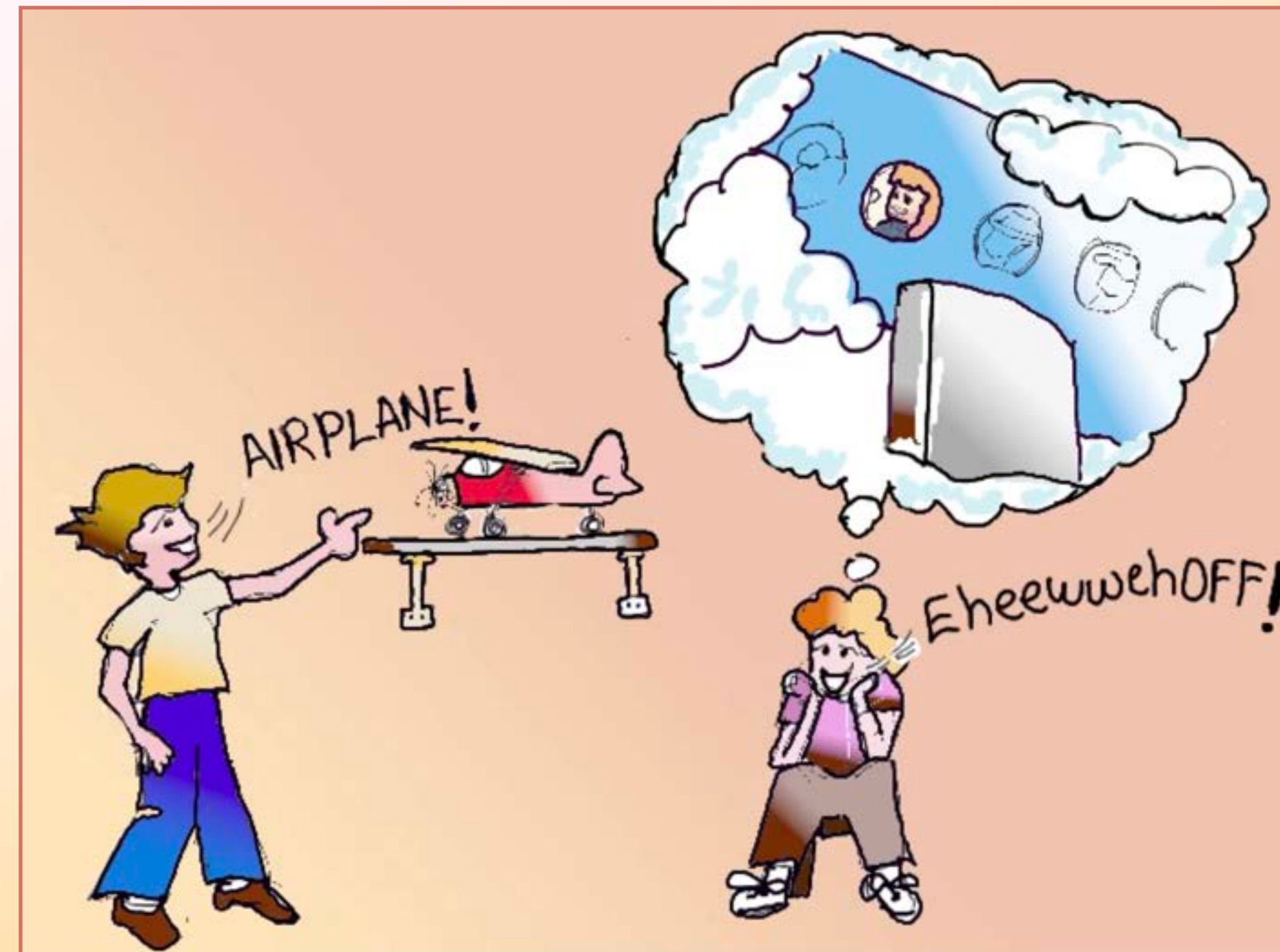
And as Autistic adults remind us:



Gestalt thinking/gestalt cognitive processing is likely
a life-long way of experiencing the world!

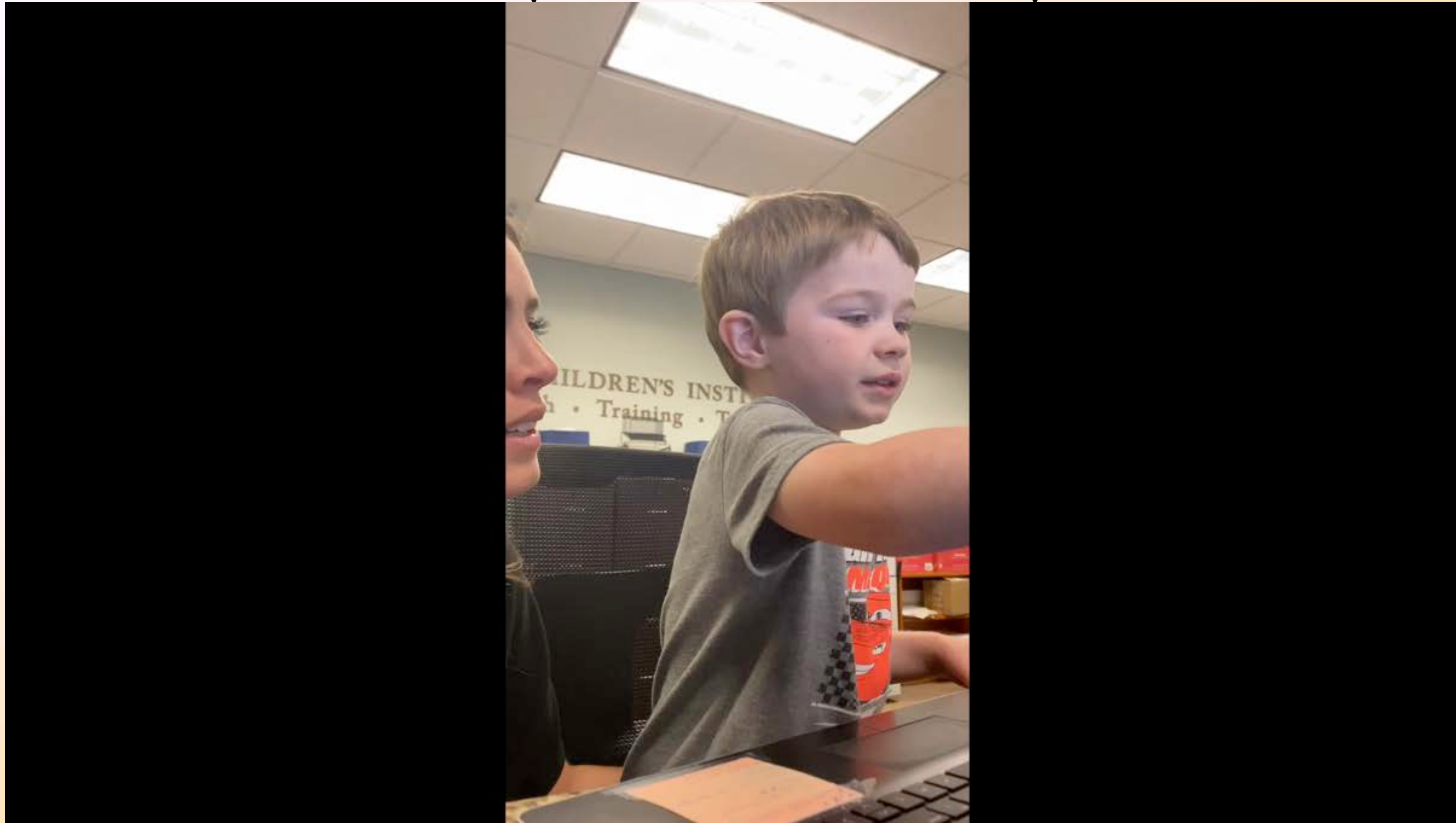


Each child's language matches their experience: for the analytic child the airplane is a 'thing,' something we pointed to and named, and so did the child. It was easy-to-say, and easy for us to understand.



The gestalt child saw the toy plane and remembered the exciting experience of taking off in an airplane and dad saying, "Get ready for takeoff... and we're off!" The child tried to say it but it was too hard. So he did the best he could. He sounded a lot like his dad, but not so clear.

Language gestalts are 'delayed echolalia'
Since they come from a different time and place — we cannot
always take them literally



Gestalt language can't always be taken literally. The child says "It's too loud," but he means "It's too quiet." That's a gestalt!

When children shorten gestalts or
change them in any way,
the partial gestalts are sometimes
perfect



Gestalts are self-chosen by the gestalt language processor. They might come from any life experience that matters to them.



When we understand, gestalts communicate!



... because ...

Gestalts are
the foundation of language development



for children who use a gestalt process!



Gestalts are individually-chosen by GLPs.

We gotta + get ready!

We gotta + climb higher!

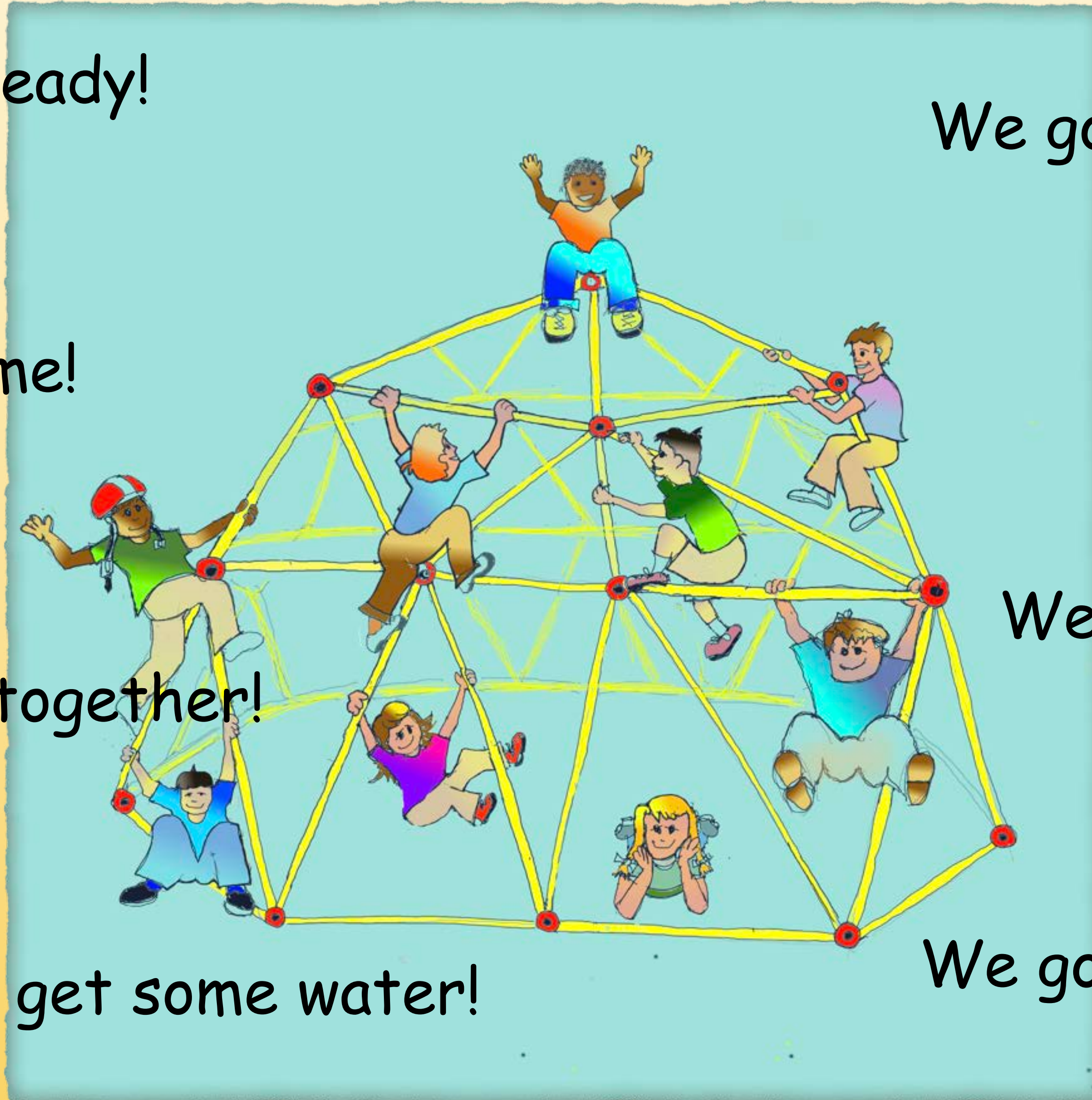
We gotta + go home!

We gotta + call Mom!

We gotta + stick together!

We gotta + get some water!

We gotta + be careful!



But we can help by modeling good possibilities!

The gestalt process is the same all around the world!



Let's look at the research

Ann Peters (1983, 2021)

The Units of Language Acquisition

"...to understand early language acquisition, one must understand the language units that children are actually working with ...

"...one of the central processes in all early language acquisition ... is the extraction of pieces, or 'units,' from the speech stream in which the child is immersed..."



"...Since the child does not know the language, it is unreasonable to assume that the first units she or he extracts will coincide exactly with the words and morphemes of the system..."

"...the existence of a 'one-word stage' of language acquisition...would have been more accurately labeled the 'one-unit stage...' recognizing that children may be extracting phrases as well as words as their first units can explain the wide range of variation in the size of these units, measured in...words or morphemes."

You can hear Ann Peters' historic book read out loud on The Gestalt Get-Together podcast!



Barry Prizant (1983) "Language Acquisition and Communicative Behavior in Autism: Toward an Understanding of the 'Whole' of it"



"...language patterns such as immediate and delayed echolalia ... can be better understood as manifestations of gestalt processing ...

"...growth and progress in the acquisition of a flexible and generative language system depends, to some extent, on analysis and segmentation of gestalt forms..."



The longitudinal
research of
gestalt language
development
(Marge Blanc, 2012)

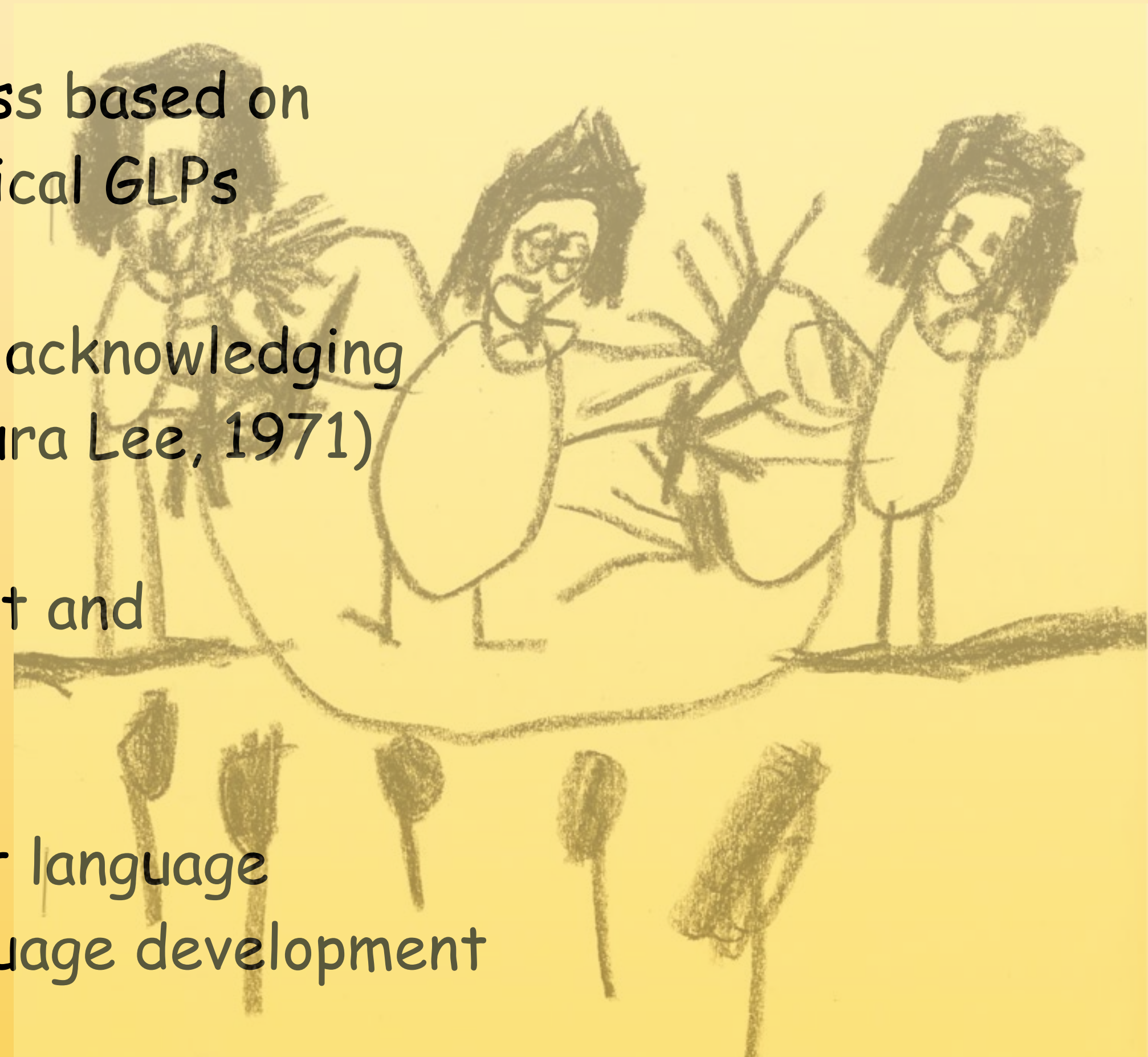
"Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum: The Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language ... provides the most comprehensive consideration of echolalia and language characteristics of persons with autism to date. In this seminal work, Marge Blanc, an experienced clinician and clinical researcher, brings us back to a crucial understanding of language characteristics and language acquisition in ASD based on her deep understanding of language development from a social-pragmatic, child-centered perspective..."

"By looking at echolalia only through a behavioral lens of pathology rather than through a developmental perspective based on research on autism and typical development, such practices may actually be hindering functional language development... This book is a 'must-read' for all who care about supporting social communication for persons with ASD based on research and sound clinical practice." (Barry Prizant, 2015)



Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) is the research-based description and quantification of language development for Gestalt Language Processors (GLPs)

- Grounded in the qualitative research of Ann Peters, Barry Prizant, and colleagues describing natural gestalt language development from echolalia to self-generated grammar
- A validation of the gestalt language development process based on 15 years of clinical research with autistic and neurotypical GLPs
- An expansion from Prizant's four Stages to six Stages, acknowledging the natural development of more complex grammar (Laura Lee, 1971)
- A quantification of the six Stages for use in assessment and measuring progress
- A detailed description of the natural process of gestalt language development, highlighting the natural supports for language development

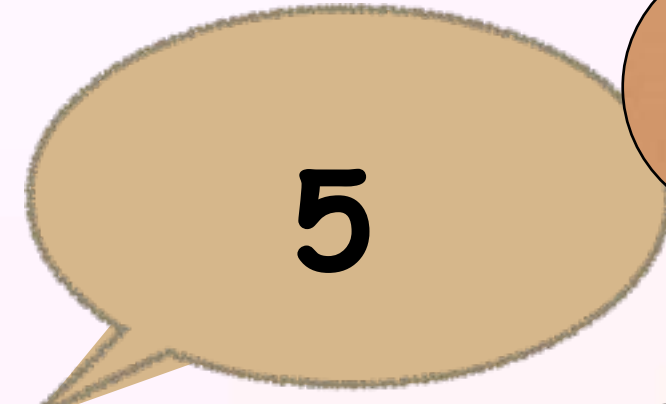


This is Analytic Language Development

6



5



4



6

Why do you think my kitty and your doggie have been friends for so long?

5

I like seeing my cute little kitty sleeping with your doggie in the chair!

4

That's my cute little kitty and that's your doggie!

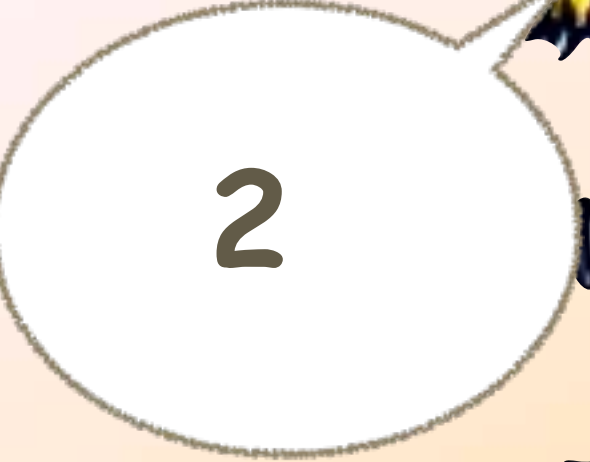
3

Cute little kitty and doggie!

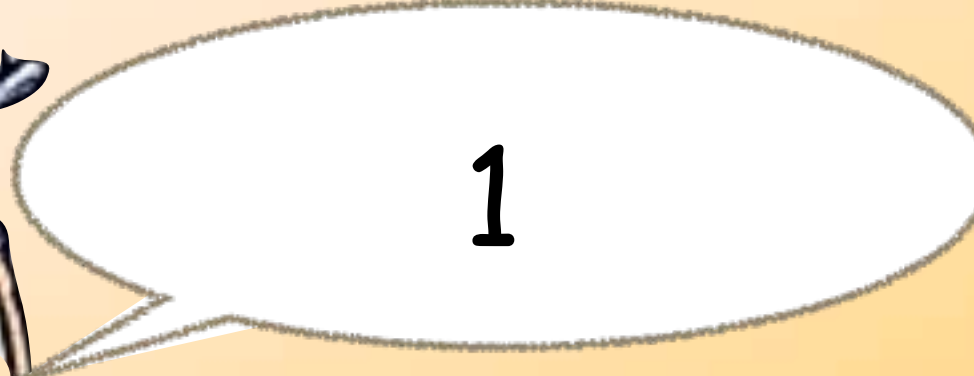
2

Little kitty! My doggie!

2



1



1

Kitty! Doggie!



This is Gestalt Language Development

6

4

5

6

Why do you think my kitty and your doggie have been friends for so long?

5

That's my cute kitty over there, sleeping with that doggie in the chair!

4

My (k) kitty cute. Doggie ... cute sleeping in ... (ch) chair.

3

Kitty! Doggie! Kitty Doggy! Window kitty!

2

You're a cute little kitty; Doggie in the window.

2

1

1

You're such a cute little kitty! "How much is that doggie in the window?"





Most little kids at
Stage 1 are mostly
unintelligible

But
at Stage 2
they are
more intelligible

Why?

What they say is
shorter!



Gestalt language is natural language ~ regardless of where it comes from

NLA Stage 1

Humpty Dumpty
sat on a wall...
Humpty Dumpty
had a great fall...all
the king's horses
and all of his men...!



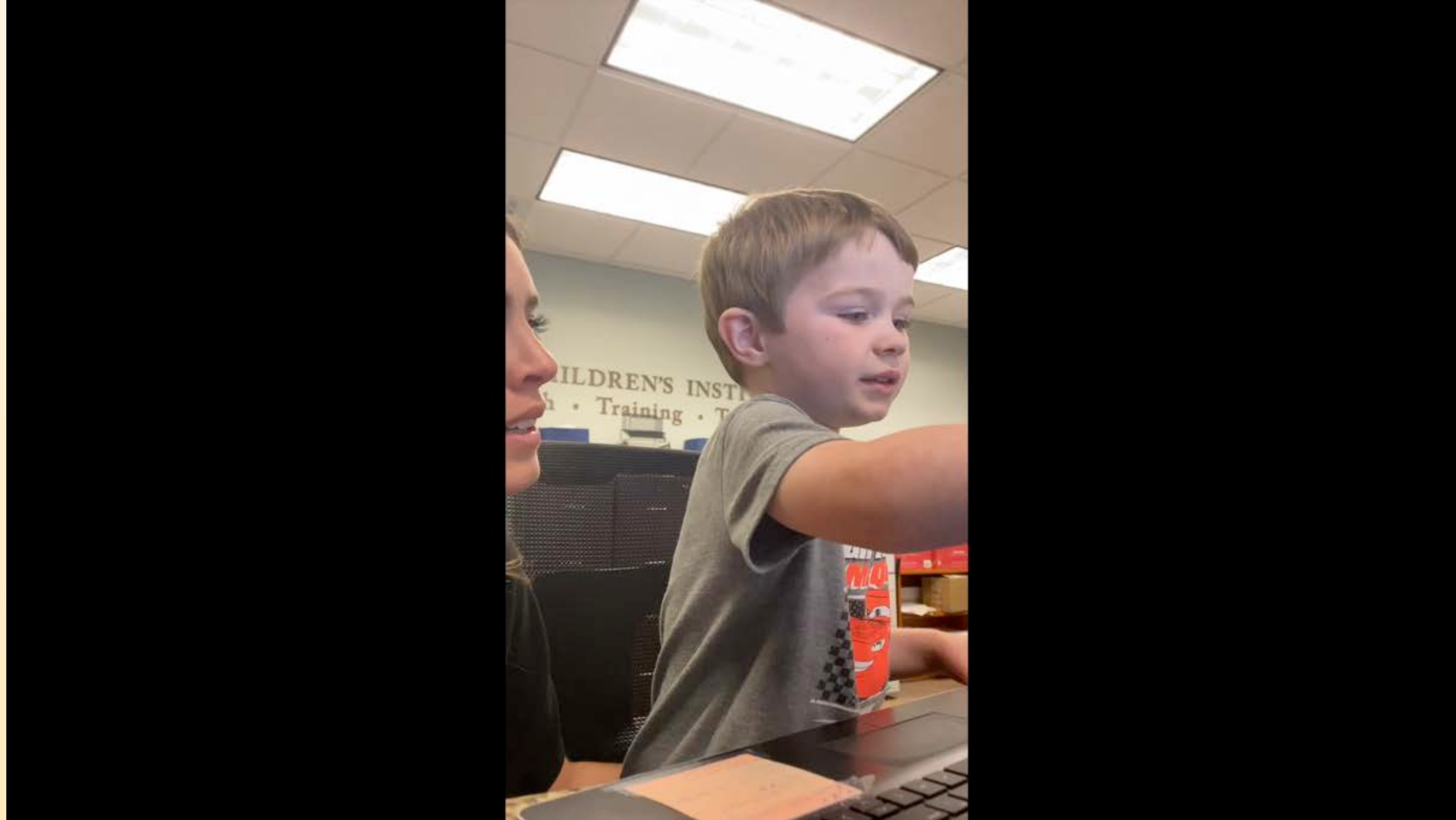
Gestalts are from a different time and place — so they can be confusing to us ~
But once we understand what the child means when they use them, our children have communicated!



Once language gestalts are **shortened**, some can seem almost perfect!
NLA Stage 2



So it's up to us:
Once we understand that a child is communicating, they
instantly become a **communicator**!



It's easier to understand when gestalts sound just like ~ **YOU!**
NLA Stage 1

I, I can get it.
I can get it.
Excuse me.
Mikey.
Hey!
Hey!
Don't.
Don't.
Don't!



That's where **YOU** fit in!
YOU are your child's most important language source!





Once language gestalts are shortened/divided, they can be mixed and matched!
Stage 2: It's a zebra!



Once language gestalts are **shortened/divided**, they can be conversational!

Stage 2: It's missing!





When mitigations are shortened again, they become single (referential) words!

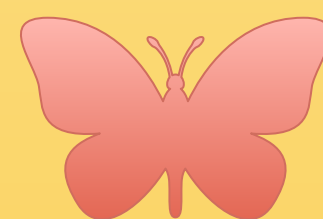
Stage 3: Pillow ... blue





Stage 4: Pre-sentence grammar ~ and sentence grammar

- Stage 4 is the beginning of grammar. It is experimental, playful, fun and often wrong. This trial and error is called "mazing" and is normal for all children who are developing grammar. Mazing increases with age, rather than decreasing! It's part of the way all children develop language naturally.
- Stage 4 begins as pre-sentences that include early grammar: subject + object; subject + verb; verb + object. It's the stage of experimental grammar ~ until Stage 4 is complete
- And then kids are ready for Stage 5 grammar
- And then Stage 6 ~ until they have a complete grammar system



NLA Stage 4: Don't be flied yet.

Hidden, whispered, and unspoken gestalts
deserve to be taken seriously
LANGUAGE IS IN OUR HEADS

Older individuals may be able to develop from
gestalt language to some grammar

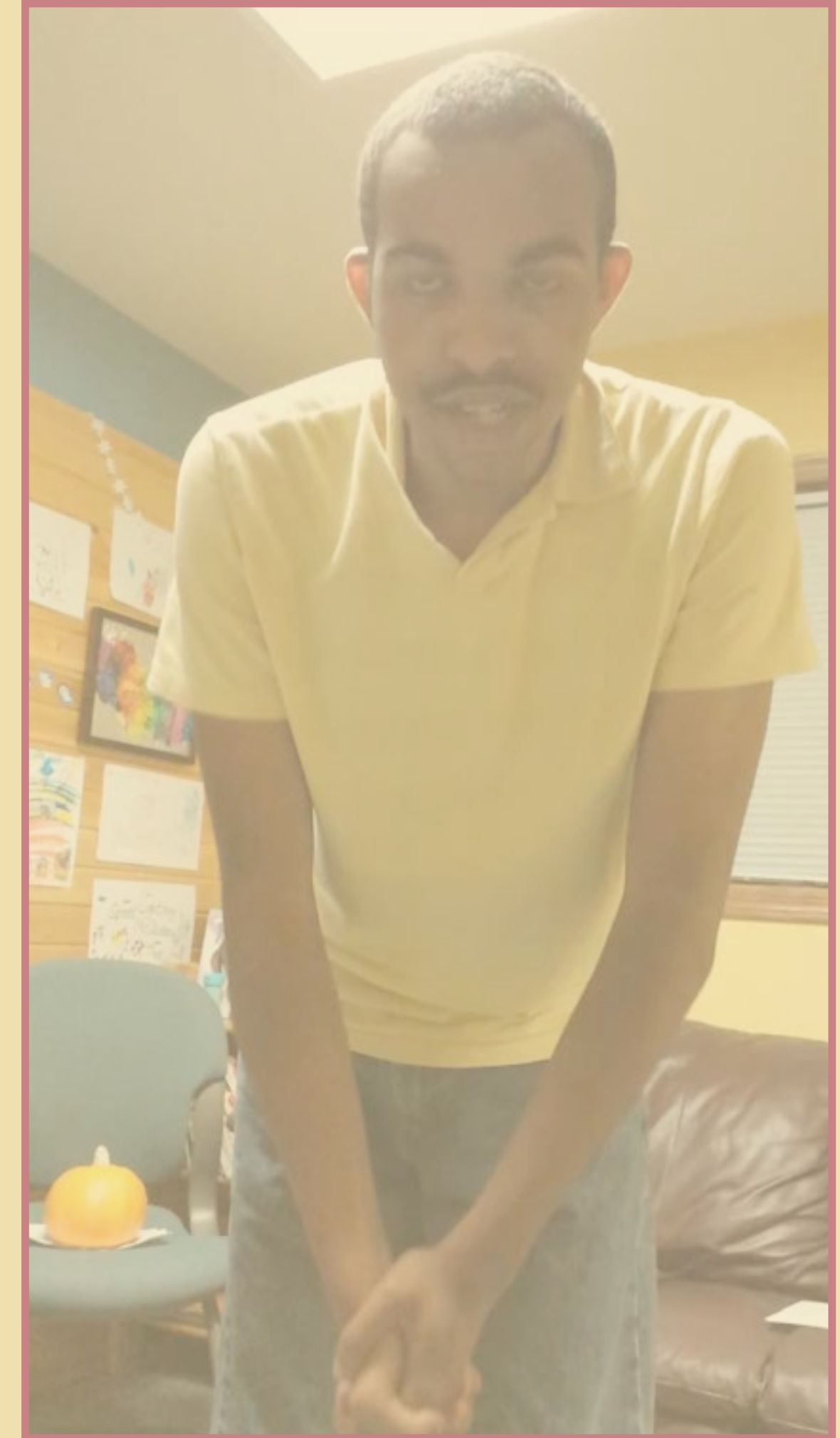
~

STAGE 2 IS AVAILABLE TO ANYONE!

~

Gestalt language is real language
IT COMMUNICATES!

Earn each person's trust and just get started!



I ... just ... free!







~
STAGE 2 IS AVAILABLE TO ANYONE!

~
Gestalt language is real language
IT COMMUNICATES!

Earn each person's trust and just get started!





These are signs of gestalt language processing!

Using language described as theatrical, borrowed, robotic, or scripted

Replaying parts of videos over and over.

Singing entire songs, but struggling to use more than a few words

Cannot put two words together

Using the same sentence pattern for everything

Producing jargon-like unintelligible utterances, but with rich intonation

Not speaking, but actively recreating scenes from TV shows and videos within their play

Producing full sentences in familiar situations, and minimal language in unfamiliar situations

Cannot answer questions or follow directions

Highly attracted to toys and videos with music or rich intonation





The gestalt process is the same
all around the world!



Thank you,
Neurodiversity Ireland!

~ Marge

