



CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS POSITION PAPER

The Role of Pragmatics in the Assessment of Autism Eligibility

The intent of this paper is to clarify the meaning of the language used in the autism eligibility criteria as described in the California Education Code (Cal. Educ. Code § 56320 (b)(1)). There has been ongoing discussion among various educational professionals across school districts regarding the current criteria for autism and the meaning of the terms *verbal communication*, *nonverbal communication*, and *social interaction* as defined in the eligibility criteria. Discussions have involved disagreement as to whether pragmatic skills are considered part of both verbal and nonverbal communication. Though pragmatics is defined as social language, this does not mean that pragmatics only belongs under the umbrella of social interaction. In fact, “pragmatics concentrates on language as a communication tool that is used to achieve social ends. Pragmatics is concerned with the way language is used to communicate rather than with the way language is structured” (Owens, 2016, p.22). This communication can be both verbal and nonverbal. Thus, pragmatic language is comprised of skills that overlap all three areas including *verbal communication*, *nonverbal communication*, and *social interaction*.

As stated in the California Title 5. Education Code Division 1. (California Department of Education) Chapter 3. (Individuals with Exceptional Needs) Subchapter 1. (Special Education) Article 3.1. (Individuals with Exceptional Needs):

1. *Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, and adversely affecting a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. (A) Autism does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance, as defined in subdivision (b)(4) of this section. (B) A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three could be identified as having autism if the criteria in subdivision (b)(1) of this section are satisfied.*

Therefore, according to California Education Code, when one is completing an assessment for the eligibility of autism, *verbal communication*, *nonverbal communication*, and *social interaction* must all present as areas of deficit independently of each other. This is inferred by the word *and* between each descriptive category as stated in the California Education Code.

Verbal and nonverbal communication are comprised of several parts. Verbal communication is comprised of receptive and expressive spoken language. Nonverbal communication is comprised of receptive and expressive unspoken language; unspoken language is expressed, or understood, without being directly stated. As discussed by Berko Gleason (2005), spoken language, and its associated components (i.e., receptive/listening and expressive/speaking), are each a synergistic system comprised of individual language domains (i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) that form a dynamic integrative whole. Pragmatics, the rules associated with the use of language in conversation and broader social situations, are included in this integrative whole (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.-b).

Both the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) and California Education Code recognize pragmatics as an area in which one may present with a language disorder. As defined by ASHA, “a language disorder is impaired comprehension and/or use of spoken, written and/or other symbol systems; and the disorder may involve (1) the form of language (phonology, morphology, syntax), (2) the content of language (semantics), and/or (3) the function of language in communication (pragmatics) in any combination” (ASHA, 1993). Furthermore, Speech and Language Disorder criteria as described in the California Ed Code Title 5. Education Division 1. California Department of Education Chapter 3. Individuals with Exceptional Needs Subchapter 1. Special Education Article 3.1. Individuals with Exceptional Needs states the following:

(D) Language Disorder. The pupil has an expressive or receptive language disorder when he or she meets one of the following criteria: 1. The pupil scores at least 1.5 standard deviations below the mean, or below the 7th percentile, for his or her chronological age or developmental level on two or more standardized tests in one or more of the following areas of language development: morphology, syntax, semantics, or pragmatics. When standardized tests are considered to be invalid for the specific pupil, the expected language performance level shall be determined by alternative means as specified on the assessment plan, or 2. The pupil scores at least 1.5 standard deviations below the mean or the score is below the 7th percentile for his or her chronological age or developmental level on one or more standardized tests in one of the areas listed in subdivision (A) and displays inappropriate or inadequate usage of expressive or receptive language as measured by a representative spontaneous or elicited language sample of a minimum of 50 utterances. The language sample must be recorded or transcribed and analyzed, and the results included in the assessment report. If the pupil is unable to produce this sample, the language, speech, and hearing specialist shall document why a 50-utterance sample was not obtainable and the contexts in which attempts were made to elicit the sample. When standardized tests are considered to be invalid for the specific pupil, the expected language performance level shall be determined by alternative means as specified in the assessment plan.

Therefore, a language disorder, as defined by California Education Code and ASHA, involves a deficit in receptive language or expressive language, which are comprised of morphology, syntax, semantics, or *pragmatics*. According to ASHA (n.d.-c), language disorders in the area of pragmatics present themselves within a social context. ASHA provides a reference table outlining the components of social communication and within this resource, ASHA specifically subsumes verbal and nonverbal communication under pragmatic skills (ASHA, n.d.-a). Receptive and expressive language, however, are subsumed under language processing. Thus, when assessing for autism, the terms *verbal communication* and *nonverbal communication* should include pragmatics.

When considering pragmatics, one must also consider the definition of *social interaction*. ASHA defines *social interaction* as speech style and context, cultural influences, gender communication differences, language interference (influence of one language on another), code switching, rules for linguistic politeness, social reasoning, peer-related social competence, social tasks (e.g., accessing peer groups, cooperative play), conflict resolution, and power relationships (e.g., dominance/deference) (ASHA, n.d.-a). The ASHA definition of social interaction in fact does not specifically reference pragmatics as a necessary component. Nevertheless, pragmatics helps us understand and define how and why we use social communication skills when interacting with others.

As described by Dijk, “language users engaging in discourse accomplish social acts and social interaction, typically so in conversation and other forms of dialogue. Such interaction is embedded in various social and cultural contexts, such as gatherings with friends or professional interactions” (1998, p.5). The way language is used for understanding each other’s thoughts, beliefs, and intentions varies depending on context and culture; however, pragmatics functions as the social language tool that shapes the way people communicate verbally and nonverbally. As discussed by Owens, “pragmatics consists of communication intentions and recognized ways of carrying them out, conversational principles and rules, and types of discourse and their construction” (2016, p.22). Hence, while *social interaction* includes an awareness of why we act and react to each other in specific ways (the known meaning across groups that allows us to cooperate and engage in relationship with each other), the *verbal and nonverbal communication* rules of discourse (pragmatics) assist in developing the systemic pattern of communication that allows people to engage in the language that permits social interaction to be meaningful.

The autism eligibility criteria require careful consideration of *verbal communication*, *nonverbal communication*, and *social interaction*. These aspects should be considered as separate entities and the child’s ability in these three areas should be addressed with a clear understanding of what each area means. The participation of Speech and Language Pathologists will be an important part of this assessment. It is hoped that this paper has provided some insight into the three terms that will allow the assessor to clearly evaluate for eligibility with an understanding of what each term entails. Particularly, it is important to recognize that the pragmatic aspect of language processing is subsumed under both verbal and nonverbal communication. In addition, social interaction is comprised of various behavioral components that are influenced by cultural norms and it is pragmatics that provides a road map for the rules of discourse navigating this interaction.

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