

ECICMC

Telephone 585-275-2263

Early Childhood Intervention Council of Monroe County

# Pragmatic Language Assessment Guidelines

## A Best Practice Document

ECICMC

Standards and Guidelines Speech Sub-Committee

Kendra Marasco

Carol O'Rourke

Laura Riddle

Laura Sepka

Vicki Weaver, Chairperson

## **Introduction**

The area of language that embraces the functional use of language in social contexts is called pragmatics. Pragmatics refers to the underpinnings of conversation: how something is said, the intentions of the speaker, the relationship between the participants, and the cultural expectations of the exchange. It is, by its nature, a complicated and elusive part of communication.

The assessment of pragmatic language skills is, necessarily, a difficult and complex challenge for speech-language pathologists. Because of the nature of pragmatics, it is almost impossible to construct a standardized test that accurately captures the essence of social communication. Past attempts at doing so have resulted in tasks that actually assess underlying linguistic or cognitive skills rather than true social communicative functioning. At this time, there are no reliable and valid standardized tests of pragmatics for the preschool population. However, the assessment of pragmatic development is necessary to understanding a child's competence in language use. In that the development of pragmatics in preschool and school age children has been well documented by research, that research can be used as a guide in assessing the pragmatic language of children.

In an effort to assist in the establishment of best practice guidelines for Monroe County evaluators, a group of experienced speech pathologists representing a variety of agencies participated in a task force on pragmatic language. Members included Vicki Weaver (Stepping Stones Learning Center), Kendra Marasco (Communication Center for Hearing and Speech), Carol O'Rourke (Clinical Associates of the Finger Lakes), Laura Sepka (BOCES #1), and Laura Riddle (Rochester Hearing and Speech Center). The group reviewed current research, developmental information, and position papers from the American Speech Language and Hearing Association regarding pragmatics. This document is intended to offer information to evaluators and eligibility teams about best practice in judging the pragmatic development of preschool children.

## **Background**

Children develop pragmatic language skills in much the same way that they acquire milestones in other areas of development. Pragmatic language skills, such as eye contact and smiling, begin to develop soon after birth. They coincide with and are embedded within regular language development. Some research suggests they may be closely linked to play skill development. In the normal course of language development, children learn about the rules of verbal interactions, such as how to engage others, maintain comfortable speaking distances, take conversational turns, change topics, clarify messages, and add verbal or nonverbal information. As in other areas of development, it is not unusual for children to experience some occasional pragmatic language difficulties as they learn these unspoken rules.

If problems in social language use occur often, seem inappropriate to a child's age, or interfere with the normal course of conversation, a pragmatic disorder may exist. Significant delays in pragmatic language development can be associated with auditory processing difficulties, learning disabilities, pervasive developmental issues, social emotional issues, or cultural differences, and so warrant close attention. This list is not all-inclusive.

Children with pragmatic language difficulties have great trouble using language in ways that are appropriate for their age or for the setting. They may not understand that we take turns to talk. They may talk over another speaker, or respond with inappropriate silences. A child with pragmatic language delays may interrupt excessively, shift topics abruptly, or talk irrelevantly. They may assume that every listener has knowledge of the same people and events that they do. Conversely, they may give too much information that distracts the listener and obscures the point of the exchange. Children with pragmatic language delays may not be aware of the subtle cues people use to signal interest or discomfort. Their behavior may appear rude, distracted or self-involved.

### **Acceptable Methods and Measures**

In assessing the pragmatic skills of young children, it is important for an evaluator to address both developmental expectations and the functional efficiency of the interaction. As a result, the evaluator must rely on developmental checklists and observation of children in various settings and with various communicative partners. With careful observation, parent and teacher report, a reliable diagnosis can be made.

Pragmatics involves three major language skills, which must be addressed during assessment. These are:

1. Communicative Intentions, Engagement
  - Shared attention to an object, topic or person
  - Initiating verbal exchanges, responding to the initiations of others.
  - Using language for different purposes - such as to engage others, to greet, to inform, to demand, to ask and answering questions, to propose, etc.
  
2. Nonverbal Rules of Conversation
  - Rules will vary across cultures
  - Nonverbal signals must be conducive to a comfortable interaction, such as maintaining appropriate eye contact (not too much staring and not too much looking away), maintaining appropriate distance from a conversational partner, etc.
  - Body language, posture, gestures, and facial expression must match the verbal or emotional content of message.

3. Verbal Rules of Conversation

- Conversational partners share the role of speaker and listener. They introduce topics gradually, maintain a topic for several turns, repair misunderstood remarks, and interrupt politely. They must acknowledge greetings and respond to questions.
- Vocabulary selection, tone of voice, speech rhythms, and even grammar must match the listener and the setting (e.g. formal/informal, serious/ joking, shared background/ unfamiliar listener, etc.).
- Language develops within a framework that is flexible and creative
- Frameworks are used to relate events during conversation (script, story grammar)
- Narratives follow a flexible but organized sequence

In addition, pragmatic skills must be assessed in terms of age expectations. An inclusive language developmental checklist, based on current research, can be used as a reference tool.

**Pragmatic Language Developmental Chart**

**Birth to 3 Months**

- ? Briefly looks at people
- ? Follows moving person with eyes
- ? Quiets in response to sound (responds more readily to speech rather than non-speech)
- ? Smiles/coos in response to another smile/voice (1-4 months)
- ? Excites when caregiver approaches (1-4 months)
- ? Aware of strangers and unfamiliar situations (1-4 months)
- ? Cries differentially when tired, hungry or in pain
- ? Quiets when picked up

**3 to 6 Months**

- ? Fixes gaze on face
- ? Responds to name by looking for voice (4-8 months)
- ? Regularly localizes sound source/speaker
- ? Occasionally vocalizes in response to speech

**6 to 9 Months**

- ? Initiates vocalizing to another person
- ? Enjoys being played with (4-8 months)
- ? Differentiates vocalizations for different states: hunger, anger, contentment (4-8 months)
- ? Recognizes familiar people
- ? Cries when parent leaves the room
- ? Imitates familiar sounds and actions

**9 to 12 Months**

- ? Shouts or coughs to attract attention
- ? Shakes head “no” and pushes undesired objects away
- ? Waves “bye”
- ? Affectionate to familiar people
- ? Begins directing others’ behavior physically and through gestures (pats, pulls, tugs on adult)
- ? Uses pointing to learn new vocabulary (people in environment label things as child points)
- ? Extends arms to be picked up
- ? Participates in games such as “peek-a-boo” and “pat-a-cake”
- ? Reaches to request an object
- ? Begins to vary behavior according to emotional reactions of others; repeats actions that are laughed at
- ? Participates in vocal play, using content and expression

**12 to 18 Months**

- ? Brings objects to show an adult
- ? Requests objects by pointing and vocalizing or possibly using a word approximation
- ? Solicits another’s attention vocally, physically and possibly with a word
- ? Gesturally requests action/assistance (may give back wind-up toy to request re-activation)
- ? Says “bye” and possibly a few other conversational ritual words such as “hi”, “thank you” and “please”
- ? Protests by saying “no”, shaking head, moving away, frowning or pushing objects away.
- ? Comments on object/action by directing listener’s attention to it with a point and vocalization or word approximation
- ? Labels objects
- ? Answers simple *wh* questions with vocal response (may be unintelligible)
- ? Acknowledges speech of another by giving eye contact, vocally responding or repeating word said.
- ? Teases, scolds, warns using gesture plus a vocalization or word approximation

**18 to 24 Months**

- ? Uses simple words or short phrases to express the intentions listed at the 12-18 month level
- ? Names objects in front of others
- ? Says, “What’s that?” to elicit attention
- ? Begins using single words and two-word phrases to a command (move), indicate possession (mine), and express problems (got boo boo)
- ? Much verbal turn-taking

**2 to 3 Years**

- ? Engages in short dialogues
- ? Verbally introduces and changes topic of discussion
- ? Expresses emotion
- ? Begins using language in imaginative ways
- ? Begins providing descriptive details to facilitate comprehension
- ? Uses attention-getting words such as, “hey”
- ? Clarifies and requests clarification
- ? Prenarrative development begins with heaps (collection of unrelated ideas) and sequences (story elements linked by perceptual bonds)

**3 to 4 Years**

- ? Engages in longer dialogues
- ? Assumes the role of another person in play
- ? Uses more fillers to acknowledge partner’s message (uh-huh, ok)
- ? Begins code switching (using simpler language) when talking to very young children
- ? Uses more elliptical responses
- ? Requests permission
- ? Begins using language for fantasies, jokes, teasing
- ? Makes conversational repairs when listener has not understood
- ? Corrects others
- ? Primitive narratives: events follow from central core/use of inference in stories
- ? Topic maintenance for 3 turns and provides explanations
- ? Requests more information to keep conversation going
- ? Appropriate eye contact
- ? Terminates conversation appropriately
- ? Uses indirectives/hints to get listener to do/get something
- ? Refines speech to insure listener has background information
- ? Role playing, temporarily assumes another’s perspective-jokes with conversation partner, provides warning, teases

**5 to 6 Years**

- ? Uses indirect requests
- ? Correctly uses deictic items such as this, that, here, there
- ? Uses twice as many effective utterances as 3-year old to discuss emotions and feelings
- ? Narrative development characterized by unfocused chains; stories have sequence of events but no central character or theme
- ? Tells a story by looking at pictures
- ? Describes functions of objects
- ? Communicates cause-and-effect relationships
- ? Uses contingent queries to maintain a conversation
- ? Creates interest in a listener by indirect references
- ? Communicates knowledge about the world to peers and adults
- ? Tells 2 familiar stories without pictures for help; includes all important parts
- ? States a problem
- ? Sustains a topic for 4 turns
- ? Provides information that is relevant to the listener
- ? Responds appropriately to questions involving time concepts
- ? Will answer/ask “where”, “when”, “why”, “how many”, “what do you do?”, “why do we?”
- ? Extends topic
- ? Asks permission to use other’s belongings
- ? Uses such terms as, “thank you”, “please”, and “you’re welcome” appropriately
- ? Recognizes another’s need for help and provides assistance

Taken from The Speech and Language Development Chart  
developed by Addy Gard, Leslea Gillman, Jim Gorman and other sources.

**Conclusion: Best Practice**

Using acceptable methods and measures (p.2), best practice dictates that, in reporting pragmatic concerns, the evaluator/provider will consider a child's skills relative to developmental expectations. Specific examples of how that supports their conclusions. the types of verbal interactions observed, the flexibility of their use, and the supporting function of nonverbal strategies should be documented. Observation and parent/teacher report should provide the basis for this documentation.

Of equal importance is a judgment regarding the overall effectiveness of the child's verbal and nonverbal message. Its effectiveness should also be noted. Determination of a child's level of success within a communicative exchange when age-expected supports (such as repetition, rephrasing, refocusing, etc.) are provided should be included. The evaluator must consider the impact of the behavior in different settings and with different conversational partners (family members, peers, unfamiliar adults, etc.). When difficulties in pragmatic behaviors consistently disrupt the child's communicative exchanges across settings, professional judgment must conclude the presence of a severe disorder.

A moderate delay in pragmatic language skills will most likely manifest itself within a setting that includes peers and other adults, such as: preschool, daycare, or playgroups. At this level, a child may exhibit little to no communicative dysfunction within the home environment.

With this document, speech/language pathologists who evaluate preschoolers in Monroe County are asked to be more critical in their assessment of pragmatic function, and more accountable to school districts in making a case for eligibility in this area. The presence of a delay or disorder, the severity of the condition, and appropriate goals for service can be determined through professional judgment based on knowledge of underlying language function and developmental research, and supported by observation.

## Bibliography

Gard, A., Gillman, L., Gorman, J., and other sources, (2000). Pragmatic Language Developmental Milestones.

Shulman, (1983). Pragmatic Development Chart

Wetherby, A., Cleary, J., Allen, L., Goldstein, H., (2000). First Words Project: Improving Early Identification of Communication Disorders.

Wetherby & Prizant, (2000). Major Stages of Language Development.