



Photograph by Subjects & Predicates

Paul's Talk: Teachers and Parents Look at a Child's Language

by Judith S. Bloch and
Janice L. Friedman

Paul is five. Even though this is his second year in preschool, he is extremely tense around people. When he is approached by teachers or children, Paul pulls his arms close to his body and turns away. He often seems sad and withdrawn; given a choice, he does not join other children or teachers. Paul's ability to understand language exceeds his ability to talk. Teachers have to remind Paul to use the language he is capable of producing. At times, Paul is echoic — he simply imitates what he hears. Other times, Paul's language is inappropriate to the situation. When the teacher asks all the children to sit down for music circle, all of the children sit, except Paul. The teacher asks Paul to join the group. Paul does not respond, and the teacher begins the music. Paul runs away from the group, choosing not to participate. Instead of saying this, he runs to flick the lights on and off, and comments, "Light on, light off."

Paul is at risk. Without learning to communicate through talk, he is likely to drift further and further out of touch with his peers and with adults who care for him. He will lose many chances to learn.

Assessing and helping children like Paul is difficult. No one wants to label a young child *handicapped* or *disturbed* too quickly. But when teachers and/or parents sense *something's wrong*, it is critical to act:

- Early identification of a child with special needs is important because early interventions have the most chance of success.
- It is important to rule out seizure disorders, metabolic disorders, degenerative diseases, tremors, or hearing loss.
- The state will not provide funding for preschool special education programs without evidence that a child needs the program because of a handicapping condition.
- Diagnostic evaluation and classification are necessary for effective placement.

Clinical evaluations by physicians, psychologists, neurologists, or speech therapists outside the classroom

Judith S. Bloch is the founder/executive director of Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop in Syosset, New York. She coordinates a wide variety of educational, therapeutic, social, and recreational programs for children with disabilities and their families. Janice L. Friedman is the supervisor of research and information management services of Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop.



setting are one important step in the evaluation process. These procedures can pinpoint particular difficulties: partial hearing loss; problems with speech production; inability to understand and remember directions, stories, or ideas. However, these evaluations are administered to children in an office setting by an unfamiliar adult. Consequently, this kind of testing cannot bring out other kinds of vital information. Testing sessions cannot:

- provide information the teacher and parents need for classroom or home programming;
- give Paul's teacher and parents a sense for how he uses (or fails to use) his skills at home and in school;
- offer Paul's teacher and parents a way to think together about what they want Paul to learn and how they hope he will change.

A Different Approach

At Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop, we have developed a vital supplement to formal testing for children like Paul. We change the observation site from the tester's office to the child's two primary settings: the classroom and the home. We put assessment into the hands of a child's caregivers: the teachers and the parents.

Parents are usually their child's first and most continuous teachers. They are the people who have shaped, selected, and interpreted experiences through the early years (White, 1975; Levitt, 1973). When parents participate in assessing their children, it:

- starts a collaboration between parents and teachers that is essential if the family is to help their child change;
- provides parents with a better understanding of their child's behavior;
- gives parents specific information regarding realistic short-term expectations;
- helps parents focus on a useful immediate task which can help them let go of their initial anxiety and confusion;
- strengthens parents as they learn to trust themselves as observers and educators.

Teachers also have many natural opportunities to observe and assess a child. Paul's teacher knew a great deal about:

- Paul's reactions to stress;
- Paul's strengths and weaknesses;
- what interferes with Paul's ability to learn.

- Paul's reactions to stress;
- Paul's strengths and weaknesses;
- what interferes with Paul's ability to learn.

Moreover, Paul's teacher can modify her goals and interventions as Paul changes. The daily intimacy between Paul and his teacher means that she can tune his classroom experiences to the small, but important, changes in his everyday behavior.

Helping Paul Communicate

In order to focus their observations, Paul's teacher and parents used a set of specially developed materials called *The Five P's — The Parent/Professional Preschool Performance Profile*. *The Five P's* contains 13 behavior scales across six major areas of development: classroom adjustment, self-help skills, motor, language, social, and cognitive development. In each of these areas, teachers and parents independently observe and describe the child in two important ways. First, they place children in a sequence of developmental milestones ranging from six to sixty months. Second, parents and teachers use a checklist to help them describe the kinds of behaviors which interfere with the "child's ability to profit from a learning situation" (Lidz, 1983).

In the fall of his second year at Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop, Paul's parents and teacher used the Communicative Competence Scale to describe his ability to communicate with others. (A copy of this scale is included at the end of this article.) Both his teacher and his parents observed Paul going about his usual activities during a two to four week period.

Based on this information, graphs of Paul's performance were prepared. They offered a concrete way for his parents and teacher to compare his school and home performances. These graphs also provided a way for parents and other teachers to talk over Paul's problems and strengths and develop plans for meeting his individual needs within the home and classroom.

Through observing him, Paul's teacher realized a great deal about Paul's communicative problems. (His teacher's ratings are illustrated in the language scale included at the end of this article.) For example, she saw that while Paul sometimes used eye contact and words to get other people's attention, he rarely used his skills to share ideas or experiences. She was also able to pick out the kinds of behaviors which interfered with Paul's using his existing communicative skills well. For example, she realized that Paul rarely looked at people when



he spoke. She also realized that, unless she prompted him, Paul rarely spoke directly to anyone.

Once Paul's parents and teacher had completed their observations, they met to share their findings. In discussing what they had each seen, Paul's parents and teacher realized that he showed stronger communicative skills at home than at school. For example, at home Paul occasionally took part in short conversations. Paul's parents and teacher recognized that the stresses of being in a classroom might interfere with Paul's willingness to communicate. But having shared observations, they agreed that Paul should be encouraged to use the skills he had at school. Thus, his parents and teacher agreed that one immediate goal would be to help Paul look at and exchange information with teachers and children at school.

Together, Paul's teacher and parents worked out a set of activities which would help him communicate with other people. His teacher outlined a low-key program with emphasis on activities that Paul enjoyed. She helped his parents design activities they could do at home with Paul to facilitate his adjustment to class. For example, she suggested that they prepare him for school each day by talking with him about the people he would see and the activities he might do. In that way, he would learn what to expect as well as some words that might be useful in understanding or communicating in the classroom.

Paul's teacher then moved on to constructing a plan of action for the next six months. She wrote a description of his current communicative behavior (to provide a comparison for later assessments) and worked out a list of short-term and year-long goals. In choosing these goals, she had to consider Paul's:

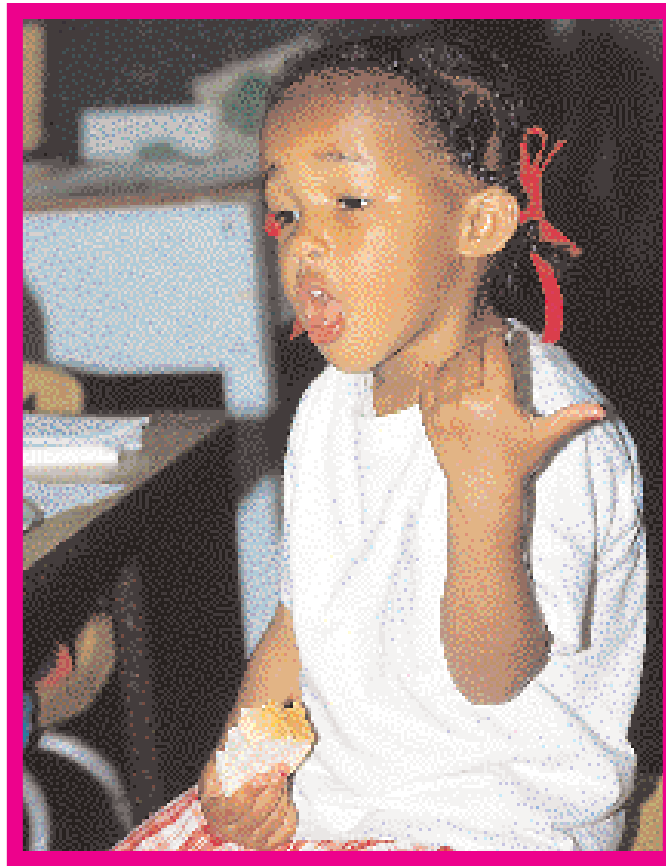
- overall behavior;
- familiarity with the class and school;

- capacity to deal with adult expectations;
- tolerance for stress.

In addition, she had to be sensitive to:

- the skills and tolerance levels of classroom staff; and
- the needs and concerns of Paul's family.

The short-term goals became the backbone of Paul's everyday curriculum. His classroom teacher built a set of learning experiences around each short-term goal. She had to think through the small steps Paul needed to take towards each of the individual skills within communication. At the same time, she had to devise ways to make such lessons engaging and rewarding. For example, in order to help Paul look at people when communicating, she designed a game with bubbles. In this activity, Paul was seated directly across from her. She held up a bubble jar and said, "Look, Paul, bubbles." When Paul looked at the bubble jar, the teacher blew bubbles and praised Paul for looking.



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

In the process of working with Paul, his teacher often had to **backtrack**. After several sessions, she realized that the bubble game was too demanding for Paul. She had to redesign the game so that it taught him the tiny sub-skills within responding to someone's call for attention. She played with Paul

until he learned to look in the general direction of her and the bubbles. Later, she waited until he looked directly at the bubble jar before blowing. Only later did she require that Paul look directly at her.

Throughout this kind of intensive communicative training, Paul's teacher had still another job. She had to remember that her persistence in implementing the remediation program should never diminish Paul's eagerness to come to



school, his motivation to learn, or his trust and affection for her. Without that kind of interest and investment, no educational program can take hold.

Paul's teacher and parents observed him again in the spring. They needed to evaluate Paul's progress and their own effectiveness in helping him. Again, both parents and teacher used *The Five P's* to guide their home and classroom observations. In Paul's case, there were rewards — he had begun to be alert to other people's messages and to use his language in school. If there had been no change, his parents and teacher would have needed to share their observations about what was interfering, draw up a new set of goals, and try to design a new set of educational experiences for Paul.

Clearly, working with a child like Paul is demanding. Diagnosis may involve a clinical assessment by one or more specialists. However, the long-term and daily educational responsibilities belong to parents and teachers.

If they can share in:

- close observation;
- careful design of a highly individual curriculum for home and school; and
- constant reevaluation,

they have the basic ingredients towards making a difference.

References

Levitt, Edith. "Parents As Teachers: A New Perspective," *IMC Reports to Parents*, 2 (1), Winter. New York: Special Education Instructional Materials Center, 1973, 1.

Lidz, Carol. "Emotional Disturbance in Preschool Children," *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 15 (3), Spring, 1983, 164-167.

White, Burton L. *The First Three Years of Life*. New York: Avon Books, 1975.



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

Addendum

Since the original printing of "Paul's Talk: Teachers and Parents Look at a Child's Language" (Bloch and Friedman, 1984), *The Five P's (Parent/Professional Preschool Performance Profile)*, developed by Judith S. Bloch at Variety Pre-Schooler's Workshop (VPSW), was revised in 1987. *The Five P's* was favorably reviewed in Buros Institute's *The Tenth Mental Measurements Yearbook* in 1989.

Development of *The Five P's* has been continual. National research studies to support the reliability and validity of the instrument have been completed. A national normalization study to develop norms for *The Five P's* began in 1990. Preliminary norms based on ratings from more than 460 teachers and parents yield age-equivalent scores. Data collection is ongoing and will be used to update the norms periodically. New materials, which include a screening and evaluation instrument, a goal bank, computer software to produce assessment and goal reports, and a comprehensive manual, have been added to *The Five P's System*. In February 1995, VPSW submitted *The Five P's System* to Buros Institute for review.

VPSW is looking for programs that provide educational services and/or child care for normally developing children 18 months to 66 months to participate in a national study in which teachers and parents prepare judgment-based assessments using *The Five P's System*.

For further information on participating in the research studies and/or *The Five P's System*, contact Janice Friedman, Supervisor of Research at VPSW, 47 Humphrey Drive, Syosset, NY 11791-4098; or call (800) 933-VPSW, ext. 126, or (516) 921-7171, ext. 126 (within 516 area code).



The Five P's Language Development Communicative Competence Scale

Ratings: Y = Yes; S = Sometimes; N = No

	Fall		Spring	
	School/	Home	School/	Home
6-12 Month Age Norms				
1. Uses eye contact to initiate/regulate social interaction	S	Y	Y	Y
2. Establishes eye contact for people/objects in order to obtain desired object	S	Y	Y	Y
3. Responds differentially to a variety of "tone of voice" patterns	Y	Y	Y	Y
4. Responds to adult initiated gestures	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. Uses one form (word) to mean (represent) many objects/people/activities	Y	Y	Y	Y
12-24 Month Age Norms				
6. Communicates through babbling with accompanying nonverbal behaviors	Y	Y	Y	Y
7. Uses words to engage others	S	S	Y	Y
8. Uses socialized greeting routines	S	Y	Y	Y
9. Uses language to make things happen	S	S	Y	Y
24-36 Month Age Norms				
10. Verbally notes own turn during interactive game	N	S	S	Y
11. Alternates turns as speaker and listener	N	N	S	Y
12. Uses different words or phrases for same purpose	N	N	S	S
13. Comments about ongoing activity	S	S	Y	Y
14. Maintains topic for two conversational interchanges	N	N	S	S
36-48 Month Age Norms				
15. Initiates conversation	N	S	Y	Y
16. Maintains topic for more than two conversational interchanges	N	N	S	S
17. Converses with peers about activity/object present	N	N	S	S
18. Begins, maintains, and ends a conversation	N	N	S	S
48-60 Month Age Norms				
19. Tells about events not in immediate environment (sequencing not necessary)	N	N	S	S
20. Describes past and future experiences in logical order	N	N	S	Y
21. Converses with both adults and peers with a wide range of intentions	N	N	S	S
22. Uses language to deal with hypothetical situations	N	N	N	N
Interfering Behaviors				
1. Repeats same message/questions even if answered	Y	Y	S	S
2. Persistent use of language (content) inappropriate to situation	S	S	S	N
3. Requires prompting in order to use language she is capable of producing	Y	S	S	N
4. Talks to self without intent to communicate	N	N	N	N
5. Repeats noncommunicative phrases (e.g., rhymes, counting, alphabet)	N	N	N	N
6. Displays a limited range of intentions (i.e., communicates only to label or request)	S	S	N	N
7. Converses primarily with adults	Y	Y	N	N
8. Persistent use of fixed topics or themes predominates conversational exchanges (e.g., colors, mechanical objects)	N	N	N	N
9. Frequently interrupts speaker to respond to his message before message is completed	N	N	N	N

