

# Will My Child with Autism Ever Talk? Helping My Child Climb the Language Mountain

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# DISCLOSURES

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- Relevant ***financial relationships***:
  - Play Project - supervisor and master trainer
  - Palm Beach Speech & OT Specialists - owner/director and provider of Play Project
  - Professor: MGH-IHP, & NSU - teaching courses related to autism and the Play Project Methods
  - ASHA - course developed, content the Play Project
- No relevant ***non financial-relationships***.

## LEARNER OUTCOMES

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- Examine language development of children with autism from a functional developmental perspective.
- Facilitate language acquisition and communication skills by guiding the child up the ‘language mountain.’

# INTRODUCTION

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- It is estimated that about 40% of children with ASD are nonverbal leading to one of the most frequently asked questions from parents “*Will my child with autism ever talk?*”
- For many families of children with ASD, having their child learn to *talk* is their primary goal.
- Thus, it is our job to appropriately answer this question based on research and to assist parents using evidence-based taxonomies and intervention practices.

# TYPICAL DEVELOPMENT VS. AUTISM DEVELOPMENT

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- Babies start to absorb language as soon as they are born, mainly through interaction with parents and caregivers.
- Children with autism, who are not thought to be motivated by social interaction, may not seek out opportunities to interact and may not develop language skills in the same way that typically developing children do.
- Children with autism may be focused on non-social stimuli causing a decreased interest in speech and talking.
- When it comes to delays in speech and language for those on the spectrum, research often points to differences in brain circuitry, reward systems, motivation, and brain activity—a combination which explains a completely different language trajectory.



# PARENT'S BIGGEST WISH

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- **We want our child to talk!!**
- Every parent or caregiver looks forward to their child's first words. Aside from being a magical moment, speech is a specific milestone for children, which starts to develop from the time they start to babble.
- But what do we do when that doesn't happen?

## WHERE TO BEGIN?

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- **Responsive parenting** is linked to language gains for both neurotypical children and those with autism. Responsive parenting follows the child's lead and it recognizes the child's cues, non-verbal communication, and body language.
- **What intervention does that sound like....?**
- **Finding a way UP the Language Mountain...**A conversation with Dr. Solomon and the parents of Jacob, a 3 year old with Autism. Excerpts from the book, "Autism: The Potential Within."

# THE WISH FOR 'TALK'

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- **Parent:** “To be honest, I’m a little frustrated because for us, our child’s talking is our top priority.”
- **Solomon:** “Well, he’s already starting to communicate. He takes your hands to get what he wants. He’s starting to understand some routines, right?”
- **Parent:** “But that’s not *talking*. He doesn’t even say ‘Hi’ when he meets someone.”
- **Solomon:** “But he’s got some words that he uses sometimes.”
- **Parent:** “I know, I know, but I want him to *talk*—like his brother does.”
- **Solomon:** “His brother is almost 18 months?”
- **Parent:** “Yes, and he’s starting to put some words together. You can actually carry on a little conversation with him. I just wish our other son could do that.”
- **Solomon:** “I’m confident that he will, but he’s got to climb what I call ‘the Language Mountain’.”
- **Parent:** “The ‘Language Mountain’?”



# CLIMBING THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN

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- Begin at the bottom in order to get to the mountaintop of *conversation*, children (and their parents) must start at the bottom of the mountain and take their first steps upward.
- Follow a functional developmental level approach (Greenspan & Weider, 1997).

# FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS

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- FDL 1: Shared Attention and Self Regulation (Birth - 3 months)
- FDL 2: Engagement and Relating to Others (2 - 7 months)
- FDL 3: 2-way Communication with Gestures (3 - 10 months)
- FDL 4: Complex 2-way Communication with words/phrases, social problem solving, and mood regulation (9 - 18 months)
- FDL 5: Shared meanings and creating ideas in pretend play using words/phrases, Wh?'s, and Emotional Intention (24-30 months)
- FDL 6: Emotional thinking, Logic, sense of reality (34 - 48 months)

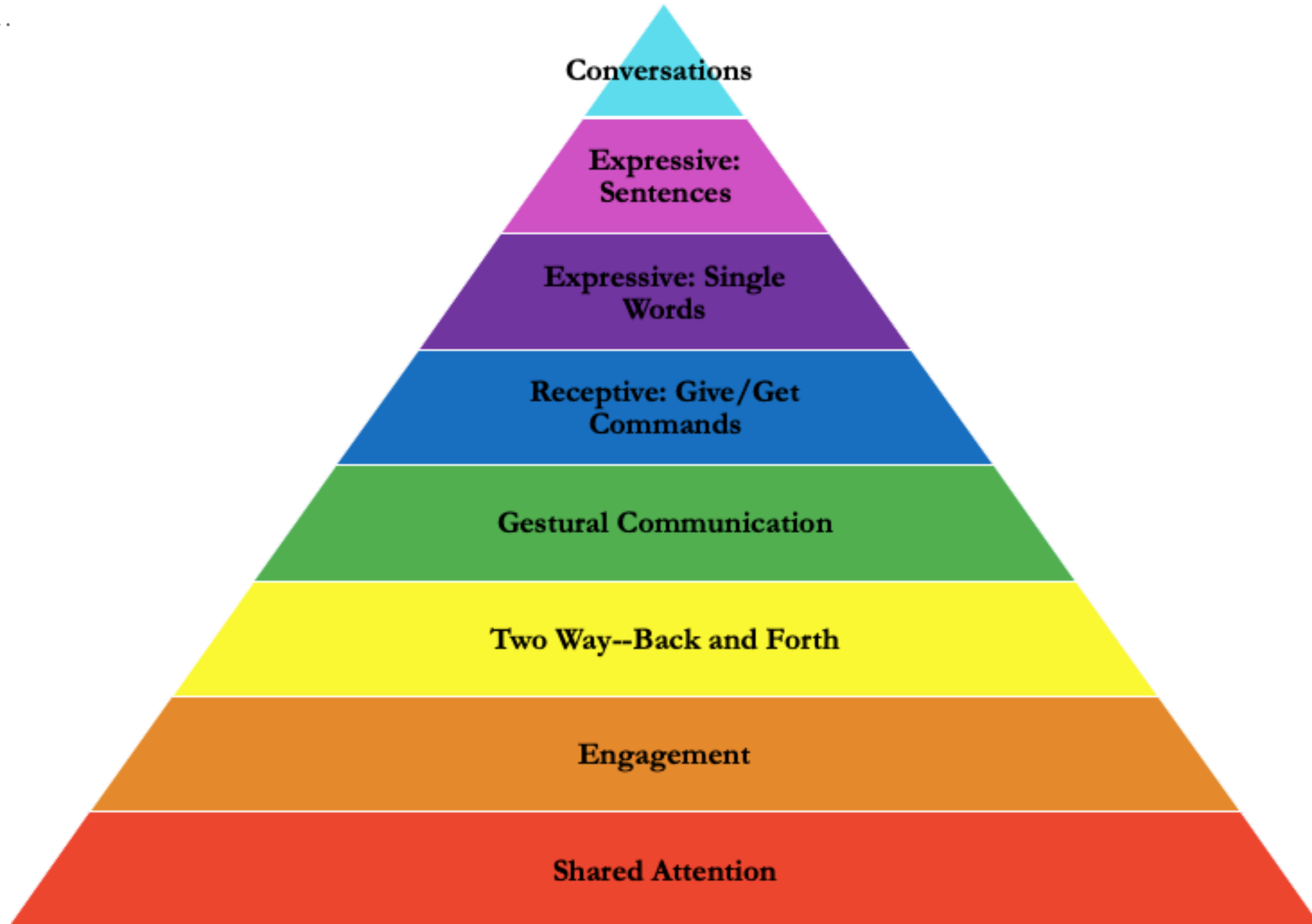
## FIRST STEPS

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- These first steps begin with the simple ability to *share attention*, then stay *engaged* long enough to interact in a *two-way back and forth* fashion until the child can communicate mostly through *gestures*.

# CLIMBING THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN

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# HAVE FUN!

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- The key in the beginning is to have **FUN** during social interactions by following what the child likes and wants in a way that will make the child **want** to interact with you.
- Paradoxically, this *non-verbal* play is the fastest way to help your child gain language that leads to social communication!



# GESTURAL COMMUNICATION

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- Once the child is communicating back *gesturally*, he will start to *understand a.k.a. receptive language*.
- He will be able to truly make sense of the world. When you say, “Outside” he’ll go to the garage and get his shoes.
- After several more months, he will be able to *understand the spontaneous one step commands* like “Go get your shoes. Bring your shoes to daddy, etc.”
- \*\*This can take a year or even more depending on how fast the child can climb.

## MAKING THE CLIMB

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- When all these preliminary milestones at the bottom of the Language Mountain are in place then *single words* will multiply a.k.a., *expressive language*.
- After several more months to a year, *two word sentences* will emerge.
- Finally, *longer sentences* will lead to the ability to carry on longer and longer *conversations*.
- Conversation is the *last* milestone and, depending on the child, could take a couple of years.

## CHILDREN WILL 'TALK' WHEN THEY CAN...

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- Communicate gesturally
- Follow routines
- Solve simple problems (e.g., get you to get them food)
- Play very simple pretend (phone to ear, feeding baby doll)
- Have longer back and forth interactions (circles)
- Follow one-step spontaneous (not routine) commands to 'go get' an object and 'give it' to someone

## CHECKING IN...

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- Does the parent understand?
- Parents most often are not really *hearing* you. They want their child to 'talk' *no matter what*.

# SPEECH VS. LANGUAGE

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- **Parent:** “Isn’t there any way we can speed up the process?”
- **Solomon:** “Putting in more time—intensity—will speed up the process, but if you go beyond 2-3 hours per day, the child will burn out, you’ll burn out, and everybody in the family will suffer.”
- **Parent:** “Oh, we’re going to put in the time, but I’m talking about speeding up speech somehow.”
- **Solomon:** “Actually you can speed up speech.”
- **Parent (excited and interested):** “How?”
- **Solomon:** “By repetitive drilling and focusing on speech itself. But you have be careful not to speed up speech at the cost of **language.**”
- **Parent:** “I thought they were the same.”



# SPEECH VS. LANGUAGE

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- There's a big difference between **speech** and **language**.
- Depending on how you learn to speak, some children with ASD may have good *speech*, but they have difficulty with **engagement**, and the **back and forth of real communication**. They have difficulty carrying on a conversation and having **socially effective and functional communication**. They are good at **speech**, but not so good at **language**.

# AHA MOMENT!

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- **Parent:** “I get it. *Speech* is what comes out of your mouth. . . .”
- **Solomon:** “. . . *Language* is the ability to communicate.”
- **Parent:** “So you can speak, but not really communicate.”
- **Solomon:** “Exactly. I have a lot of parents who drilled their children to speak before they were truly ready. The children developed words, but they weren’t connected to people in a natural way. Many of these children sounded robotic, had poor gestural communication (with flat voices or odd sounding talk) or just used words to get what they wanted but they didn’t *enjoy* interacting and conversing with people.”
- **Parent:** “We don’t want that.”

## PATIENCE FOR COMMUNICATION

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- It's tempting to just go for *speech*. It takes a lot longer and a lot of patience and time to build this capacity for real communication.
- Let's think about it this way...

# A HOUSE OF BRICKS

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- **Solomon:** “Think of it as building a house. First comes the foundation—attention, engagement, a few back and forth circles of interaction. Then come the walls—lots of circles (the ping pong back and forth) of communication, gestures, and problem solving. *Then* comes the roof—words, sentences, conversations. There’s no way around these functional developmental levels when you’re trying to build a solid structure.”
- **Parent:** “Like the house of bricks in the Three Little Pigs. I’ve been reading the story to the boys. They’ve been huffing and puffing all around the house. So we *can* speed up the process of speech.....”
- **Solomon:** “.....and build a straw house. Or we can focus on ‘language’ and communication more than speech.”
- **Parent:** “....and build a brick house.”
- **Solomon:** “Right on! It takes longer this way but it’s better.”



# A HOUSE OF BRICKS

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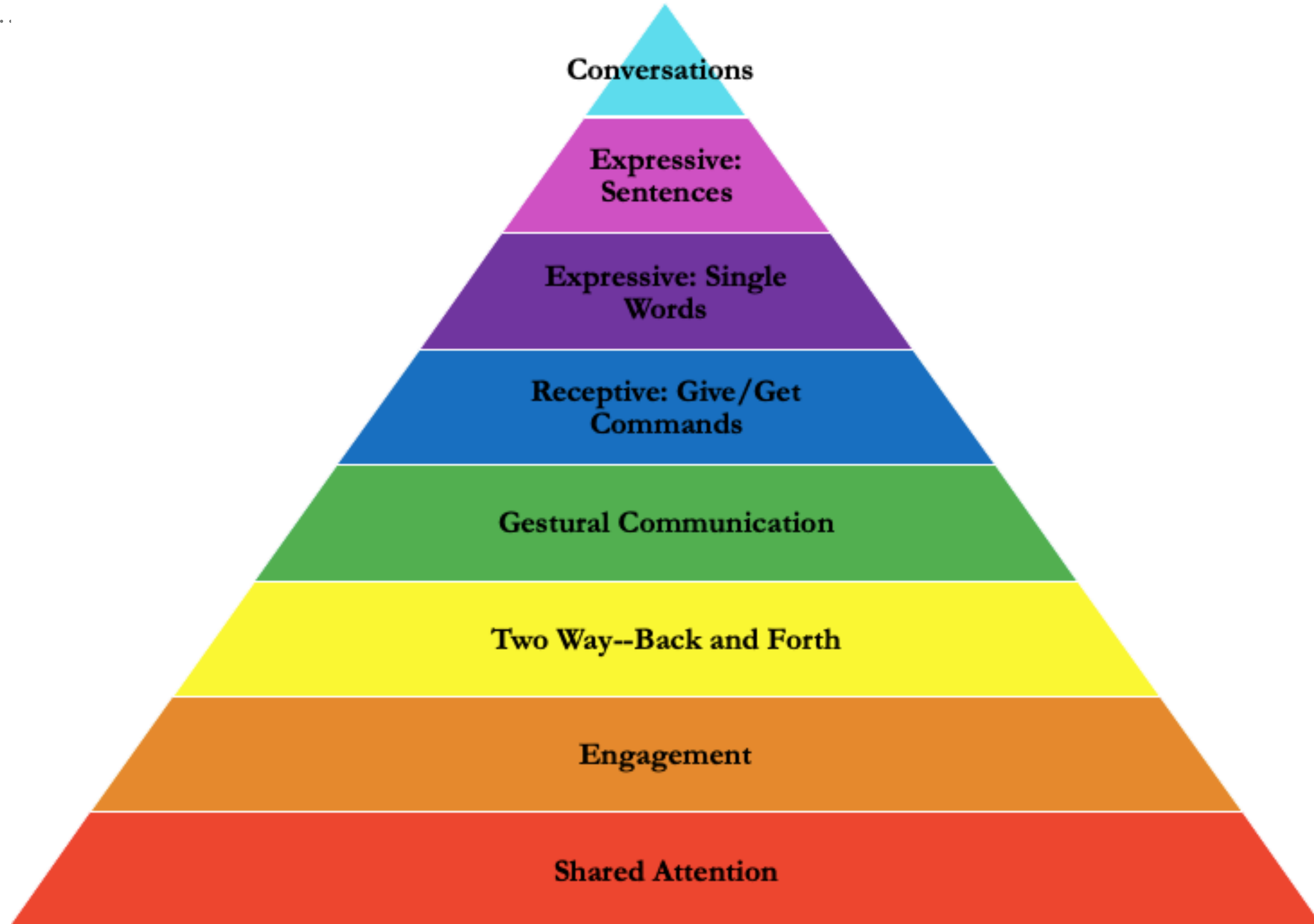
# THERE'S NO WAY AROUND THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN

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- It's hard convincing parents to start at the bottom of the mountain
- **Parent:** "OK, I'm convinced we shouldn't force speech. But, if we do it your way, how long before we get to the top of the Language Mountain?"
- Let's walk through the language mountain again. Here's the chart...where is your child?

# CLIMBING THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN

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# GESTURES

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- *I cannot emphasize enough* the importance of gestural communication to the child's language development.
- Up to 80% of our communication is in the form of gestures.
- There's many different types of gestures...

# TYPES OF GESTURES

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- Taking hand
- Turning head
- Body Orientation
- Pointing
- Showing
- Giving
- Head nodding or shaking
- Eye contact
- Vocal inflexion
- Proximity



## DON'T IGNORE THE MEANING OF GESTURES

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- Make sure we pay attention to the *intentions behind the gestures* and treat gestures as if they matter, because they do!!
- **Don't ignore gestures...**

# HAVE FAITH THAT SPEECH WILL COME NATURALLY AS LANGUAGE DEVELOPS

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- By not paying attention to *gestural* intention we trade the child's true communication system (i.e. gestural language) for speech.  
**Solomon:** "A bad trade."
- If you ignore gestures, your child will learn that his gestures and intentions don't matter.
- You must have faith in the process that *speech* will come naturally as *language* develops.
- Trying to push for speech can ruin language.

## EXAMPLE: 'I WANT JUICE'

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- **Solomon:** “There’s a little boy, we’ll call Johnny, who want some juice from the fridge. He’s gesturing. He’s reaching, pointing, making faces that clearly indicate with gestural language that he wants juice. His mom says: ‘Johnny, what do you want?’ Johnny’s arm is out pointing; he’s grunting, he’s reaching. *Mom says:* What do you want? *Johnny:* Grunting, getting frustrated, still not saying what mom wants. Finally gives up crying and starts to wander off. *Mom says:* What do you want? Say ‘juice’, say ‘I want juice please’. Johnny comes back in anticipation. *Mom:* Say ‘juice’. ‘I want juice, please’.”
- “Eventually after many trials Johnny may learn to say ‘juice’ but this is a mistake of parents who think that *speech* is the goal. No! *Language* is the goal. And early language is about **gestures** not words.”

## GESTURES

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- “Johnny was clearly communicating what he wanted through *gestures*. By ignoring his gestures, Johnny’s mother is ignoring his most important communication system. As a result, Johnny’s gestural language may be **impoverished.**”



## EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

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- There is one exception to the rule that speech will follow language development....when the child has *apraxia* or *dyspraxia*.
- That's when other solutions are needed e.g., traditional speech therapy and/or augmentative communication.
- But we still have to work on the *language first*, from the bottom up to climb the 'language mountain'.

# THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN

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- How can you help your clients climb the ‘Language Mountain’ so that they will have the best chance of developing *functional* language, language that truly communicates with others?
- Use the principles and methods of the PLAY Project!

# PLAY PROJECT PRINCIPLES

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- Fun with people-Do what the child loves!
- Use Put in the time-2 hours per day broken up into 15-20 minute sessions.
- Accurately profile the child in terms of their: 1) Comfort Zones, 2) Sensory-Motor Profile, and 3) Functional Developmental Levels.
- Play at the right level, based on the child's profile.

# PLAY PROJECT METHODS

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- Read the child's cues and intent
- Use Slow the pace of play, observing and waiting for the child's idea
- Follow the child's lead, responding to what the child wants
- Open and close circles of communication (back and forth interactions)
- Build on the child's interests

# PLAY PROJECT

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- First and most importantly you have to have FUN together. That will lead to *shared attention* and *engagement*, then longer and longer back and forth interactions.
- We focus on these right away in the PLAY Project. Then, assuming all goes well, the child will march up the mountain with gestures and improving receptive language and after that, a lot of single words.
- After that, the child will start talking in two word phrases



## TRAJECTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

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- In general, according to Dr. Solomon, having a mild autistic disorder costs a child at least *two years* of his or her developmental life.
- **Parent:** “So you’re saying it’ll take about 2 years and he’ll be talking.”
- **Solomon:** “Not just talking, but really **communicating**. And it’s going to be fun along the way. Please have some faith in the process.”

# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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- The most important thing is to have **fun** together.
- Find a good SLP, to guide the child/parent up the Language Mountain.
- Use the following techniques for building language.

# LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

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- Honor gestures as communication.
- Speak for the child. Use **statements** *not questions*.
- Onomantopoeia-words sounds like what it means.
- Asked and answered
- Salient language
- Speak to the child in normal tones and rhythms - *no baby talk*
- Know some common first words

# CHILD'S FIRST WORDS

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- Rejection: No
- Nonexistence: All gone, away
- Cessation or prohibition of action: No, stop
- Recurrence: More, again
- Action on objects: Get, do, make, throw, eat, find, draw, fix, wash, kiss, push, squeeze
- Locative action: Put, take, up, down, out, sit, fall, go, dump, turn
- Attribution: Big, hot, dirty, pretty,
- Possession: Mine
- Commenting: Look
- Social Interaction: Hi, bye-bye, night-night

# LATER LANGUAGE MILESTONES

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- As you progress up the language mountain, the child will hopefully will be able to:
  - Imitate words
  - Label objects
  - Use two word phrases
  - Have simple conversations
  - Answer Yes AND No
  - Answer what, where, and who questions
  - Use verbs and actions
  - Use simple pronouns (me, mine)
  - Eventually, ask and answer why/how questions and recall the past



# THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN WORKS!

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- I hope you can see how the Language Mountain works.
- It is empowering to know that you can participate responsively in this journey to attain a goal that will help the child navigate to 'talking' and communicating with others.
- Remember to start with interaction, then gestures, then words.
- **Here we go!!**



# GESTURAL COMMUNICATION - VIDEO 1

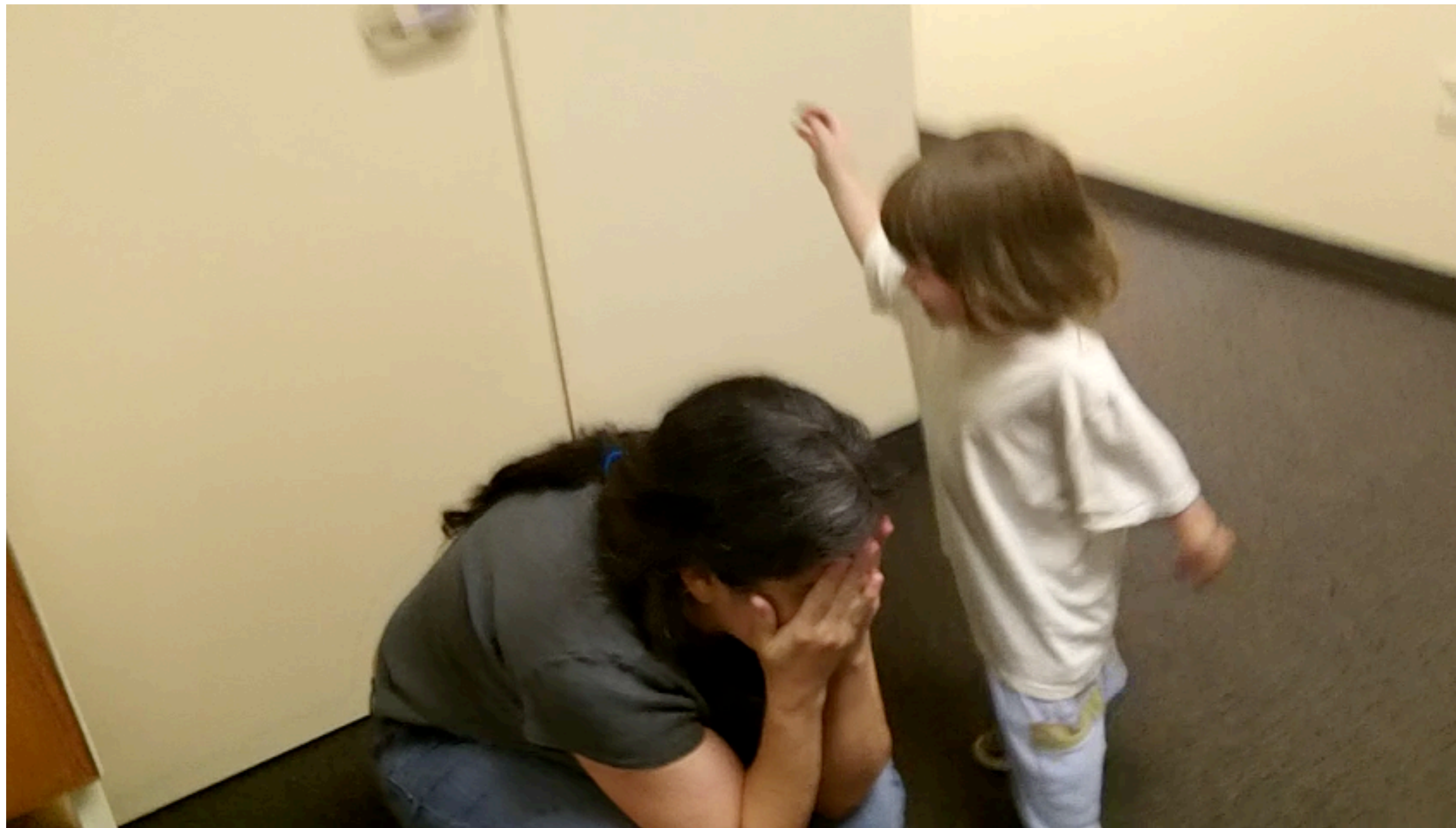
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# CLIMBING THE LANGUAGE MOUNTAIN – VIDEO 2

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# SUMMARY

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- When following these simple tips, you can help a child to ‘talk’ so that he/she will have:
  - Joyful relationships
  - Shared social attention (FDL 1-3)
  - ‘With us’ continuously, not fragmented/stuck in comfort zones
  - Socially functional & interested in others
  - Simple and complex nonverbal gestures
  - Long interactive sequences (e.g. 50+) of back and forth interaction
  - “Circles” of spontaneous verbal communication
  - Symbolic language related to feelings and the world around him/her (FDL 4-6)

**LEARN MORE**

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[www.playproject.org](http://www.playproject.org)



# REFERENCES

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