

## **'Semantic' and 'Pragmatic' Language Difficulties**

Sometimes children have difficulty in using language in conversation in a social manner. They may have difficulty with the 'semantic' or 'pragmatic' aspects of speech and language.

*'Semantic'* refers to the meaning of words.

*'Pragmatics'* refers to the use of language in a social context, taking into account the rules of social interaction, such as: -

- Taking turns.
- The manner in which we speak to people in different situations.
- Interpreting and using facial expression, body language and tone of voice.
- Timing of responses: knowing when to interrupt and how to interrupt a conversation.
- Knowing how much information to give
- Checking that the listener has understood the message,
- Staying on one topic, or....
- Introducing the listener to a change of topic.

**A child with 'Semantic' and/or 'Pragmatic' difficulties may show some, but not necessarily all, of the following features in their communication or behaviour: -**

- Difficulty in joining in a conversation at the right time.
- Asking too many questions but not showing any interest in the answer, or knowing the answer already.
- Saying something that has nothing to do with what you are talking about at that moment or shifting from one subject to another very quickly, leaving you wondering what they are talking about.
- Not giving adequate eye-contact during a conversation.
- Not understanding body language or tone of voice.

- Talking in a sing-songy voice.
- Echoing what someone else has said or using phrases that they have heard on many occasions.
- Lack of pretend play or imagination e.g. difficulty pretending that a box is a car or a hat.
- Difficulty in working out some of the things that we 'infer' in what we say (but do not actually put into words) An example may help explain this: For instance a child might say: 'Can I go outside to play' and his mum says, 'Well it's nearly tea-time'. What she means is that there isn't enough time before tea for him to go outside to play. So the answer is 'No, because it's tea-time'. The child may find it hard to 'infer' what is meant from what is actually said. As a result a lot of misunderstandings can occur.
- Difficulty in concentrating, particularly when the activity has been chosen by someone else.
- Difficulty in understanding questions and instructions.
- Appearing quite comical or bizarre in the things they say and do.
- Saying too much and not giving the listener a chance to talk.
- Not checking whether the listener is interested in the conversation or understands what they are saying.
- Liking to do things in a particular way. May get upset if their routine is upset.
- Very specific interests such as trains, dinosaurs, sometimes to the point of not wanting to do anything else.
- Reading skills may be ahead of their understanding.
- May be clumsy or unco-ordinated.
- May have repetitive movements such as shaking their hands or flicking their fingers.