May I Have a Word?

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What Do Impact Craters Have to Do with Speech-Language Pathology?

As a speech-language pathologist, one of the questions I am asked most often by concerned parents of late talkers is, "How do I know if my child will be okay?" or "Will they catch up?" Though we don't have crystal balls that foretell the future, we do possess the knowledge of potential red flags or areas to consider when determining whether parents have legitimate concerns that should be investigated further or if more time and quality language exposure may be sufficient remedy.

As I've sought ways to effectively communicate to parents what to look for, I've coined a term or acronym that helps parents think through five different areas of language development that give us valuable clues. The acronym is **W.I.P.U.L.**, pronounced "whipple" as the name of a lunar impact crater. I utilize the mental picture of an impact crater (a depression on the surface of a solid body formed by impact of a smaller body with the surface) when thinking of a "depression" in language skills that may not be indicative of a true language delay or disorder. If you're looking for a simple way to walk parents through these five areas, feel free to utilize my visual for WIPUL available at www.thespeechstop.com. Below is a summary of how I present this to parents.

Words - *Use of Words More Than Gestures*

Here I discuss how gestures and body language are effective communication tools early on, but eventually words become more effective for communication, and therefore, normally-developing children tend to rely on words more than gestures as they mature and develop.

Intent - *Communicative Intent or Desire to Communicate is Present*

Here I explain that even when all the words are not there for expression, seeing a child's desire and attempts to engage in communicative interactions, including eye contact for example, is a good sign. Red flags go up when children remain isolated or disinterested in communicative interactions with those in their environment.

Play - *Appropriate Play Skills*

Here I walk parents through normal stages of play, from solitary play to parallel play, from associative play to cooperative play, where children go from playing alone as they explore their environments to playing side by side without much social interaction to playing together with structure, cooperation and shared goals. I also speak of the important skills of pretending and symbolic play, as children demonstrate a clear understanding of objects, their use, as well as appropriate associations and representations during play interactions.

Understanding - *Good Understanding of Vocabulary and Language*

Here I discuss how some children may have smaller vocabularies, may not be combining words, or may have disorganized language structure, which all create communication barriers. If these children, however, show a good understanding of the vocabulary and language around them, being able to follow commands, to respond appropriately, and to clearly show understanding of the vocabulary/language in relation to objects, toys, foods and people in their environment, then less concern is warranted.

Learning - *Readily Learning New Words and Concepts on a Daily/Weekly Basis*

Lastly, I assure parents that if their children show they are learning new words and concepts on a regular basis, even if not at the same pace as their peers, that steady growth is a positive sign. I also explain we look not only for concrete words for persons, places, and things (nouns) but also for action words (verbs) and more descriptive words such as in/on/off (location), hot/cold (feature), big/small (size), one/all (quantity), fruit (class) and so on.

I must note that for multicultural families, this conversation may be somewhat different since some cultural norms dictate different behaviors and expectations of children as well as different interaction styles between adults and children.

As parents utilize this acronym to analyze their children's communicative development, it facilitates their understanding of their child's current status and assists them in the decision-making process in terms of if and when to seek a professional for a comprehensive speech-language evaluation.