The Recognition and Use of Verbal Humour by Children with Language Impairment

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Abstract

People who have a significant problem in making themselves understood using their natural voice have the opportunity to use a variety of augmentative and alternative communication methods, which includes computer based voice aids, to take part in interactive communication. However, voice aids are often rejected or underused, and many assisted communicators remain passive rather than active conversation partners. Storytelling is a common and important part of conversation. However, children with language impairment have been found to have difficulties in developing storytelling skills. Children love to make-up and tell jokes and riddles – these examples of verbal humour are stories in miniature, offering an opportunity to practise language, conversation and social interaction skills during childhood. Children with language impairment often miss this experience, which includes receiving valuable feedback from communication partners on the suitability of their language and conversation. This presentation reports on an investigation into the recognition and use of verbal humour by children with complex communication needs using the Keyword Manipulation Task (KMT), a procedure specifically designed for humour research with children of all abilities and especially those children with expressive language difficulties. Results indicate that some young children with language impairment clearly recognise verbal humour technique and enjoy using humour. The variability of performance across age would suggest that humour recognition is likely to be a reflection of the child's current cognitive and metalinguistic abilities. The general conclusion is that providing access to verbal humour play for children with language impairment will narrow the gap of language experience opportunities between children of all abilities.