



Tommy learns to speak, sign language the key

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Of the Emerald

Benson Schaeffer doesn't look up when the door opens.

He lays a piece of candy between himself and seven-year-old Tommy. Keeping Tommy's attention with his eyes and his hands, Schaeffer says, "Touch Benson, Tommy." Tommy touches Schaeffer. "Whose shirt is this?" "Shirt is Benson's," answers Tommy. "Good talking," replies Schaeffer in speech and sign language. He hands Tommy the candy.

Tommy's learning to talk is a unique success story which is tied very closely to Schaeffer, a University associate psychology professor. Before he came to the University's Child Research Laboratory, Tommy couldn't talk. Instead of playing with other children, he spent his time tearing bits of paper, making noises, throwing tantrums. Now, Tommy will be attending a special education class at a public school in Roseburg.

Tommy's story is a common one to children who are autistic. When other children began to learn to talk, Tommy, like most autistic children, regressed. He became withdrawn and unable to relate to people. Alternating between aggression and passivity, he used physical action to entertain himself. Although psychologists didn't know what caused his disease, they did know that autistic children seldom learn to speak. But Tommy did learn, and Schaeffer had a lot to do with that achievement.

"Autistic children rarely speak," said Schaeffer. "What we do here is work to overcome their disabilities. We use a pragmatic approach—we try to teach kids to talk."

Tommy, along with three other autistic children, attends the Child Lab four hours a day, five days a week. He has learned to speak in a way different from most children—he began by talking with his hands.

"People had tried to teach autistic children to

speak before," says Schaeffer. "Using behavior modification techniques, you could get the kids to imitate sounds, but the language didn't mean anything to them. They could imitate words, but not use them."

At UCLA, Schaeffer worked in one of the first projects which attempted to teach speech to autistic children. He used a system of rewards to encourage autistic children to learn words but, according to Schaeffer, "They never used them on their own."

Schaeffer has since been able to teach the autistic children at the Child Lab to use spoken language spontaneously. He starts by teaching them sign language. When they answer questions correctly, he says "good signing" or "good talking" and gives them a reward.

"These kids have motor ability," he said. "They don't walk into doors. Physical actions mean something to them. Sign language, because it's a physical action, is closer to them than spoken language."

Schaeffer hit upon the idea of using sign language as an intermediate step in teaching speech, while talking with graduate students Arlene Musil and George Kollinzas. They taught sign language to autistic children in a Chicago program.

"I thought it might be the link between physical action and speech that we needed," said Schaeffer.

So teacher became student, and Schaeffer learned sign language from Musil and Kollinzas. He arranged for them, along with two other graduate students, to work with four autistic children at the Child Lab. They taught Tommy how to sign.

"We would use sign language and speak at the same time," said Schaeffer. "One day Tommy started using the words along with the sign language." Schaeffer found that the meanings Tommy associated with the physical motions of the sign language had transferred to the spoken words. He carried the sequence a step further and phased out the signing completely.

"It was an important development," Schaeffer said, "because it showed sign language could be used as a step in teaching verbal communication."

Tommy now signs only occasionally and has begun using language to express his feelings. He uses words creatively to direct his actions, a level of communication other programs haven't reached.

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Photos by Kernie Steinhauer

Jimmy (top) and Kurt (above) are two of the autistic children benefiting from the sign language method of learning to speak. Later (below), they extend a hand of friendship to their instructor.

