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It Bears Repeating

By [Christine Gralow](#)

Two of my preschool students with autism are currently going through stages of repeating their favorite words and phrases over and over again. Both students repeat lines from their favorite children's videos and books — stories and episodes of “Dora the Explorer,” “Blue's Clues,” and “Max and Ruby.”

Amanda repeatedly says, “Benny the Bull,” who, as I was slow to realize after hearing his name dozens of times one day, is her favorite “Dora” character. She has also memorized many of Benny the Bull's lines from the show, and she repeats them at seemingly random moments. David repeats the word “notebook.” At first, I thought he just really liked the word, or that he was proud of himself for learning it. Then, after he began repeating lines from “Blue's Clues,” I realized “notebook,” came from Joe's “handy dandy notebook” in the show. And lest this excessive repetition be blamed solely on TV and DVD's, one of my former students, who rarely watched TV, repeated her favorite scene from the book “Harold and the Purple Crayon” — “moose and porcupine eating pies!”

While the ability to remember and repeat words is an important step in every child's language development, many children with autism tend to repeat words excessively and in socially inappropriate contexts. A child with autism may repeat the same word or phrase hundreds of times a day (which can drive their parents and teachers a little batty). In the autism education field, repeating lines from movies, TV shows and books is known as scripting, or echolalia. (Some people use the terms scripting and echolalia interchangeably, while others distinguish echolalia as repeating words spoken by live people, not in shows.)

Scripting was famously portrayed in the film “Rain Man,” when Raymond Babbitt, the autistic character played by Dustin Hoffman, memorized and repeated Abbot and Costello's comedic skit, “Who's on First.” In the film, Raymond seemed to use scripting to calm himself in stressful social situations. At times, my students appear to script for a similar calming effect; at others, it seems to be meaningless, out-of-control repetition. Despite the many challenges this behavior presents, it is possible for young students with autism to use it in socially appropriate contexts. Encouraging them to do so is one of my goals as a special education teacher.

Many of my students have proven themselves capable of memorizing a word or phrase, associating it with a particular emotion or social situation, and then attempting to use the phrase when they encounter a similar emotional or social situation. One of my favorite examples of this is described in Paula Kluth's book, "You're Going to Love This Kid." Kluth tells the story of a boy who said, "Go to hell, lieutenant," when he was upset. The boy was scripting from the film "A Few Good Men" and he correctly associated the phrase with anger. In another case, one of my students memorized the phrase, "Hello, everyone. How are you today?" — one of his teachers often said this when she entered the classroom.

One day, when I brought the boy home, he walked into his family's apartment and said, "Hello, everyone. How are you today?" His parents and I were floored. At the time, this was by far the most socially meaningful language the boy had ever used. While he had learned the phrase through rote memory, he showed progress in social communication — a skill that children with autism often lack — by correctly associating the phrase with entering a room and greeting people.

One thing I can not do as a teacher is miraculously change the way my students' brains develop or the way they process language. There is clearly something in the brain development and language processing of children with autism that differs from their typically developing peers. Genetic researchers, such as the scientists with the [Autism Genome Project](#), are currently trying to pinpoint the root causes of the disorder.

We don't yet have all the scientific answers to what causes autism, and it remains to be seen whether a cure will be developed, or whether a "cure" is something that would be welcomed by those affected by autism. Many parents have told me they would welcome a cure, while many higher-functioning autistic adults are offended by the notion of needing to be cured. In the meantime, there are language development techniques that teachers and parents can use to help children with autism begin to socially connect with their peers and families.

One of the programs I learned while training and working with the [Center for Autism and Related Disorders](#) is a social questions activity. Using the basic principles of [Applied Behavior Analysis](#) (ABA), I am able to teach my students to answer questions ranging in difficulty from, "How old are you?" to "What was your favorite part of the book?" While my students typically learn to answer these questions in a rote manner by memorizing the questions and answers, the next step is to take what they have learned through memorization and use it in socially meaningful situations at school.

David, the boy who repeats lines from "Blue's Clues," was able to quickly learn the answers to many socially relevant questions. During snack time at preschool last week, I asked him, "What's your mommy's name?" We had worked on this question, so he quickly answered correctly. Then I asked one of his classmates at the snack table what her mommy's name was, and soon all of the children at the table were telling their friends their mommy's names. We then did the same activity with daddy's names and favorite foods. (Of course, teachers should be sensitive to kids who may not have both parents.)

These are the kinds of basic, pre-school level conversations that come naturally to most kids. But David needs to be taught to participate in such conversations in a step-by-step manner. That's where breaking things down through ABA becomes helpful. While I am not a strict ABA practitioner in the classroom, I do find it helpful to use the basic principles of breaking larger tasks into smaller steps and quickly reinforcing my students for achieving each step. Within ABA, there is a more recently developed model that I use called the Verbal Behavior Approach. This model is especially useful for language development activities.

While I can't get inside David's brain to know for sure what he's thinking, something does seem to click for him when he participates in these kinds of peer conversations at school, and he seems to enjoy them. Being able to use his memorized language with his peers, and hearing that they have different answers to the same questions, does appear to be helping him connect with them socially. Throughout the pre-school year, our social question activities will become more complex and, step-by-step, we will build up to asking questions and initiating peer conversations. The ultimate goal is for David to begin talking with his peers more spontaneously. Spontaneity in language is difficult to teach, but I aim to give David more opportunities to reach this stage by pushing him beyond his scripted comfort zone.

Language issues like this, which can be so exasperating for parents and teachers, do not disappear overnight, but I find it helpful as a teacher to keep in mind that the same strong memorization skills my students use while scripting can be shaped into socially meaningful language.