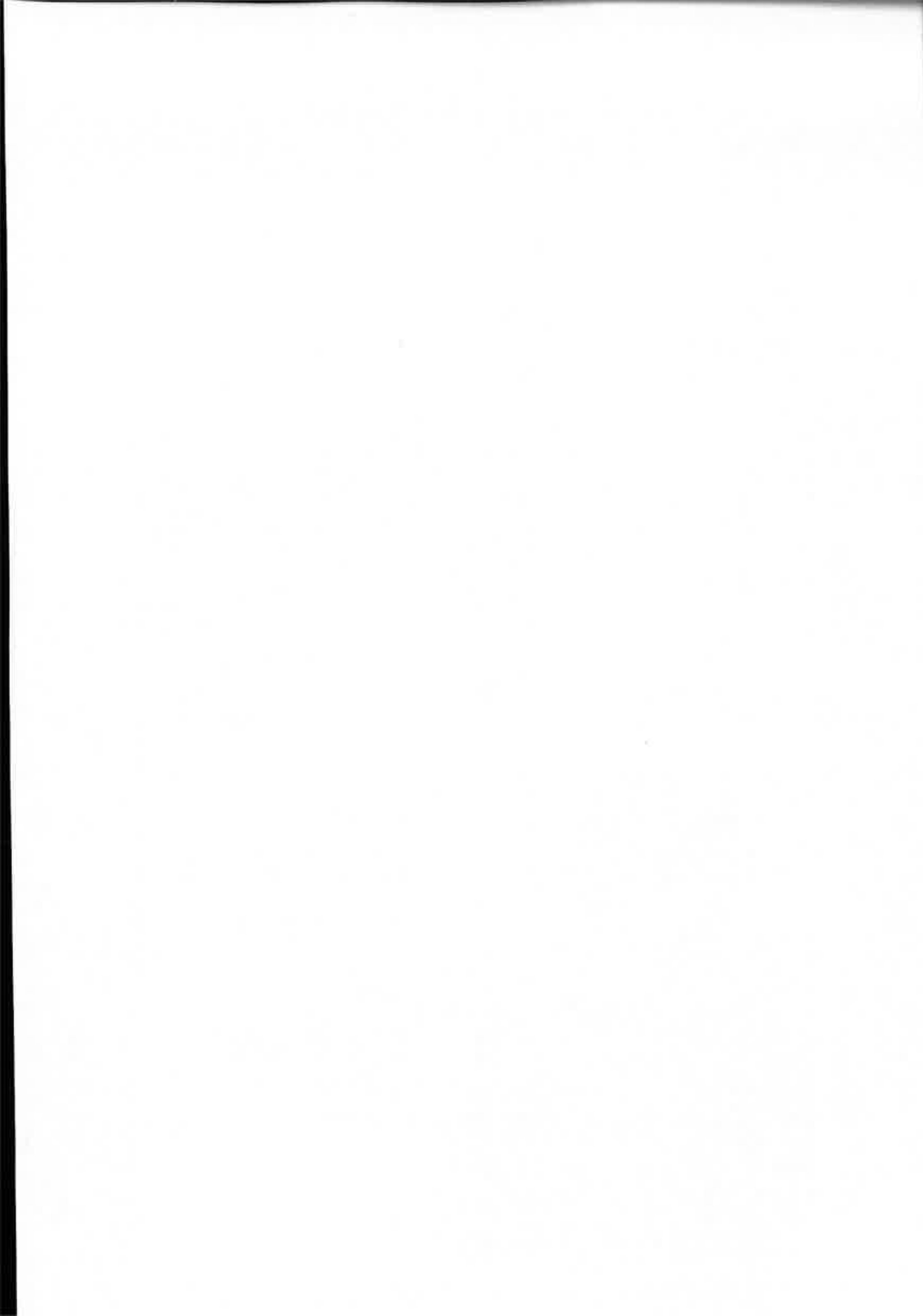
Reading Too Soon

How to understand and help the hyperlexic child

Susan Martins Miller



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How to Understand and Help the Hyperlexic Child

Susan Martins Miller

Center For Speech and Language Disorders
Lombard, Illinois

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This book is dedicated to the strange and delightful children of hyperlexia, who bless the world by their presence in it, and to all who see these children as gifts and not problems, as pleasure and not pain, and as treasures to be held close to the heart.

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Foreword

Sally Bligh and I had been speech and language pathologists for nearly 20 years before coming across the literature on hyperlexia. We had worked with many autistic children at our Center. Some were fixated on letters and numbers, and some could even read. But more curious, we also saw children who showed autistic symptoms when they were very young, but by age four to five, the autistic symptoms diminished or disappeared. They learned language, albeit through echolalia and memorization of whole phrases, and developed precocious reading skills. Although problems in language and social communication persisted, these children succeeded in school and were delightful in their differences.

Were these children "cured" of their autism? Was our therapeutic program so powerful as to make these changes happen? Or were we seeing a cluster of symptoms and developmental patterns that could be described as a syndrome somewhere on the continuum with autism?

We remained puzzled until Kathy Barouski, the educational therapy coordinator at our Center, heard Jane Healy speak on hyperlexia at the 1985 Orton Society Convention. "Aha," we thought, "others have seen this pattern." Mitzi Schilling, the grandmother of an autistic reader and a librarian, searched the literature for us. We discovered about 20 articles on hyperlexia, dating from 1967. The articles represented a variety of opinions, but some described the cluster of symptoms we had been seeing: precocious reading developing spontaneously before the age of five, a particular pattern of language processing problems, and difficulty with social behavior and communication. To differentiate this group from autistic and mentally

handicapped savant readers, we called this cluster the *syndrome of hyperlexia.* As it stands now, despite the descriptions in the professional literature, there is no medical diagnostic category for hyperlexia. Practically speaking, the diagnosis given for chidren with these characteristics is often Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Language Disorder.

Our interest has always been working therapeutically with children and their families. We were most interested to find which treatment approaches worked with hyperlexic children.

We wrote to authors to see if they had followed up on their original research and asked for their ideas on how to work with these children. A few still had an interest in the subject. Dorothy Aram and Jane Healy wrote a comprehensive review article in a book called *The Exceptional Brain.* Unfortunately there was little mention of treatment in the literature.

So we developed our own strategies. We began to talk about these children and our approaches at speech and language conferences, autism conventions and in-service workshops for special education professionals. Each time we talked, several more children with this syndrome emerged. We wrote up our presentations as informal papers, and parents, grandparents and professionals spread them around the country by photocopy and fax. Several times each week someone calls the center and says, "This describes my child," or "I'm working with a child just like this; can you give me more information?"

In 1992, the Center for Speech and Language Disorders and the American Hyperlexia Association, a national organization formed by parents associated with our Center, sponsored a two-day conference on the syndrome of hyperlexia. In cooperation with the University of Chicago and through the generous support of the Alice and William Butz Foundation,

authors, researchers, teachers, speech and language pathologists and parents came together to pool their ideas in an effort to better understand and provide treatment for this unusual group of children. At this conference, Susan Martins Miller, a writer and a parent of a hyperlexic child, proposed the idea for this book. In the following months, she gathered information from parents and professionals through questionnaires and interviews and by perusing the literature and taped presentations. The result is *Reading Too Soon*, a highly readable, informative, down-to-earth handbook. *Reading Too Soon* will be particularly helpful to parents but will also provide teachers and therapists with insight into children with the syndrome of hyperlexia.

Phyllis Kupperman, Co-director
Center for Speech and Language Disorders
Elmhurst, Illinois
1993

1

When your child is different

The house is full of squealing, rambunctious children, cousins delighted to be together for another birthday party. As they move pack-like from room to room, one little boy remains on the outskirts. It does not bother him that the other children are there; but it does not interest him, either. He would rather sit with the grown-ups and read the birthday cards aloud over and over.

Eventually he finds a box of crayons. Instead of coloring, he lays out the crayons in the neat formations of block letters and spells his name. His parents try to get him interested in playing with the other children, but he resists their explanations and instructions; he would rather be alone.

Perhaps you know a child who is "different," one who acts much like this little boy. You might be a parent, a relative, a teacher or a caregiver who wonders why the child you know is not quite like the others on the playground. You want to understand why the child you know was addicted to "Wheel of Fortune" at 16 months of age. Why is it that a child can learn to read but does not really understand or talk very well?

COMPARING: GOOD OR BAD?

All children are different. Put 15 three-year-olds together in a preschool class and you will have 15 different developmental histories, 15 different personalities, 15 different sets of talents and 15 different levels of ability on any given task. Nevertheless, there are certain achievements and behaviors common to most three-year-olds. Pediatric professionals can predict what a child should be able to accomplish at various stages of development. And so experts identify the milestones—and parents anxiously watch to see if their children reach them on schedule.

Listen to snatches of conversation at any gathering where parents are present and you will hear statements like: "When Carlos turned two, he could already ride a trike!" "Betsy was only nine months old when she started walking." "Stevie was potty-trained before he was two-and-a-half." "Maria asked me the funniest question the other day." "Tommy does everything his daddy does."

You, on the other hand, are the parent standing on the sidelines physically wrestling with your child—who still is not potty-trained; who has never answered a question correctly, much less asked a funny one; and who hardly seems to notice that Daddy is around. Not only is your child different, you feel different, too.

Should you compare your child's development to what other children achieve? In North American culture, a great deal of literature is available about child development and preferred parenting techniques. It is common for people to begin planning their parenting styles and methods before the baby even arrives. The truth is that you can read all the right books and subscribe to all the right magazines and still not be prepared to be a parent—much less to parent a child with special needs.

Some parents expect their children to develop precisely according to Dr. Spock's schedule; others

embrace the laid-back philosophy that every child is different and it does no good to compare. First-time parents may feel they have nothing practical to compare with, so certain unusual developments may not receive the attention they warrant. For instance, at 13 months of age, one firstborn child was given a calculator to play with during a real estate meeting his parents were involved in. He entertained himself contentedly with that gadget for an hour. His parents did not think too much about it until developmental problems became evident at a later age. When his younger sister was given a calculator at a similar age, she lost interest after about ten seconds—a more "normal" reaction.

Somewhere in the middle between never comparing and always comparing is a fine balance. Although every child's developmental timetable is different, being aware of what is "normal" helps you know if your child might have serious problems that need extra attention.

Understanding the Difference

It is now clear that your son or daughter is not developing as expected—what now? Here is one scenario. You might approach your child's doctor with your concerns. The doctor listens to what you say about your child's abilities—and lack of abilities—and sends you for neurological testing. That turns up nothing. On you go to the psychologist, who suggests that your child has a behavior disorder, or is autistic, or has a less-than-normal I.Q. You go from specialist to specialist, encountering label after label, but no one seems to be able to help your child—or help you understand your child.

Somewhere along this path, you encounter the term *hyperlexia* and a description that fits your child to a tee. For the first time, you hear a word that links the paradoxical characteristics of your child—who can read but not understand what you say or answer sim-

ple questions.

If you are one of the lucky ones, you discovered hyperlexia without having to go through all of those other hoops. You may have stumbled on that rare doctor who recognizes hyperlexia or a developmental preschool teacher who said, "I heard about something that sounds like your child." Some parents actually first heard the term on a medical segment of a local news broadcast.

Regardless of how you learn of hyperlexia or when it seems certain that this is the right description for your child, the process is full of emotion. You may react by saying, "Aha! This is what it is!"

On the one hand, you are relieved that, finally, you have a name, a label, to describe your child and give you a place to start. On the other hand, a label means that you have to accept that your child is indeed different. Your life becomes more complicated than you expected. Your hidden hopes that your child will grow out of this difficult phase are painfully buried in the realization that you must attack the problem head-on. Even more significant, you fear for your child's future or your own ability to meet your child's special needs. All those articles you conscientiously read about being a good parent no longer hit the mark. The experts who wrote about dealing with the strong will of a two-year-old obviously had never met a *hyperlexic* two-year-old! All of a sudden you are on your own.

WISHING YOUR CHILD WERE NORMAL

As much as you love your child and determine to do the best thing, there will be times when you wish he or she were normal. At home, you are accustomed to what things interest your child or what level of ability he or she has for certain tasks. And it is quite easy to fall into patterns at home that "keep the peace." You just may not be geared up for the screaming that you know will come if you upset the balance. And you

have enjoyable times with your child: the wonderful moments when a new concept makes sense for the first time or the family outing that everyone enjoys peacefully.

Then you go to the playground or an open house at the preschool and you see other children: their coordination, their spontaneous language, their eye contact with adults, the voluntary trips to the bathroom, their laughter as they play with each other. You stand by and watch as your child prefers not to play with the other children, flits from one activity to another without ever completing anything, and has trouble focusing on your simple request to watch where he is going.

Being out in public can be difficult just because you can never be sure what your child will do. If you tell your son or daughter to stay close to you in the grocery store—a reasonable request made by most parents—there may be an explosion right there in the middle of the produce aisle. As other shoppers steer their carts around the screaming kid thrashing around on the floor demanding fruit snacks, you feel dozens of eyes looking at you. Silently you wonder why you cannot control your child. Then the mother with four well-behaved, adorable children rolls by, calmly pulling items off the shelf in a family atmosphere of sweet cooperation. And you ask yourself, "Why doesn't my kid sit still in the cart like that? Is it so much to expect I might buy groceries without a major incident?"

It's only natural to wish your child were normal. Even after you learn the name of his or her difficulty, this feeling may not change. There may always be that slight twinge of heartache when you see the hard time your child has interacting with other children. You may always sink under the weight of frustration when you see another behavioral battle erupting. You may always be envious when you see another parent and

child interacting at a level that is not yet possible for you and your hyperlexic child. You may always wonder what the future holds.

ACCEPTING THE DIFFERENCE

The good news is that understanding the syndrome of hyperlexia can change the way you relate to your child.

One mother says, "When he was little I used to always wish he were normal. But now I think it's wonderful that he's so unique."

Having a handle on why your child behaves in that unacceptable way can equip you to deal with those glaring eyes in the supermarket. And give you ammunition to change the behavior. Getting a better perspective of the specific language problems your child has prepares you to actually teach language to your child. Knowing your child, instead of knowing the textbook developmental milestones, lets you make the most of the differences that do exist.

The father of a boy who was not properly described as hyperlexic until age seven says, "For the first years of his life, I worried a lot about my 'handicapped' child. When he was around age seven, I stopped worrying so much and started doing the normal things that fathers do with young boys. My view of him changed to 'a fantastic little boy who needs a little extra help.' That change has made a tremendous difference."

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Recognizing hyperlexia

"What is the baby's name?"

This is among the first questions asked after the birth of a child. Names are important. A child known as Tommy or Katie becomes a distinct person, not just "the paper boy" or "the girl at the store." Learning a person's name opens up the door to learning about the individual that the name represents.

Many parents have a vague sense that their children are not developing along the usual lines, and they grope for a name that describes the differences. A label is important, not because it sets some children apart from others, but because it helps parents, teachers and therapists learn about those children so they can help them develop as they should. *Hyperlexia* is a label that describes a syndrome or a set of symptoms in some children with developmental delays.

Practically speaking, hyperlexia exists on two levels. In an attempt to be accurate, doctors or therapists will look for the defining traits—certain characteristics which are consistently present in hyperlexic children. Parents also see the day-to-day manifestations of hyperlexia which grow out of the defining traits.

THE DEFINING TRAITS

Three basic characteristics make up the syndrome of hyperlexia: a precocious ability to read; difficulty in processing spoken language; and abnormal social skills.

Precocious reading. A preschooler who reads is an amazing sight. If that child is still young enough to be considered a toddler, it is even more amazing.

Perhaps the child recognizes the alphabet very early, and parents attribute it either to the hours spent watching "Sesame Street" or to natural genius. And then the words start coming. It may be popular logos: Pepsi, McDonald's, or G.I. Joe. Gradually it becomes clear that the child recognizes those words in any form, not just in a logo. The child may pick up a favorite book and start pointing to isolated words and reading them. The first word that a little boy named Andrew said was "Mitsubishi." He was looking at a newspaper ad at the time. Even reading upside down is not uncommon for hyperlexic children.

Generally between 18 and 24 months of age, hyperlexic children demonstrate their ability to identify letters and numbers. Quite often by three years of age, they see letters grouped as words and begin to read them. It does not matter in what context the words appear; the child will recognize them whether typed or handwritten, upper case or lower case. Very likely, the hyperlexic child's speech has not developed normally at this point in time, and he or she is reading words or phrases before mastering spoken language used by other children of the same age.

This is not a skill that is taught. The reading simply begins one day and does not stop. The recognition of words progresses to sounding out printed words—without phonetic instruction. The child learns to "decode" words. Some hyperlexic children achieve a very fluent level of instant, visual decoding and sel-

dom mispronounce even difficult words. Other children continue to recognize words by sight or shape, or use a combination of phonetic decoding and sight recognition.

Generally, if a child begins reading without instruction before the age of five, this is considered precocious reading and may be an indication of hyperlexia. Some may begin reading at two, others not until four. Not all hyperlexic children have the same reading level, and comprehension varies, but all recognize words at a level well beyond what would be expected of a preschooler.

Difficulty with spoken language. "David, I've told you for the tenth time, go get your cup!" As he has before, David wanders into the other room as if to obey, but soon he comes back without the cup, seeming to have forgotten the instruction completely. His exasperated mother wonders why David will not comply with such a straightforward request.

The answer is simple—David does not understand the instruction, and asking ten times, more loudly each time, will not change that fact. He knows his mother wants him to "go" do something, so he goes, but he is not sure what he is supposed to do. By the time he reaches the other room, he has completely lost hold of the instruction.

Finally his weary mother decides to get the cup herself. "Where is the cup, David?" In reply, David mutters something about the cup, but his mother cannot quite make sense of his words.

David may know very well that he left the cup under the table. He knows the answer to the question; he just does not know the question. He tries to tell his mother what he knows about the cup, but the information he gives does not match the question she asked.

To most of us, it seems incongruent that a child

who can read like a seven- or eight-year-old cannot get his cup from under the table when asked to do so. The level at which a hyperlexic child recognizes words is not the same as the level at which he or she understands them when they are grouped together to form concepts.

Abnormal social skills. Becky's mother took her two-year-old daughter to a Tuesday morning play group faithfully every week. All the other two-year-olds came to the circle time and sat in their mothers' laps to sing "Eensy Weensy Spider" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." Becky, however, zoomed around the gym in perpetual motion, seemingly unaware that there was a group activity going on. When free play time began, she darted from one activity to another, oblivious to the children around her. Becky was having a great time—but she might as well have been alone in the gym. Other children followed each other through the tunnel and invited each other into the playhouse. Becky was content to play alone, as long as the other children stayed out of her way. If they got in her way—watch out for that temper!

This uncontrolled behavior might seem like a lack of appropriate supervision to onlookers. But it is typical of a hyperlexic child. When other children are learning to talk and discovering that language can be used to communicate with other two-year-olds, hyperlexic children get off the bus, so to speak. They do not have the level of social interest that most children have; and when placed in a social setting, they do not demonstrate the skills needed to function as part of that group.

THE DAY-TO-DAY TRAITS

Parents of hyperlexic children certainly see the defining traits on a regular basis and have reason for genuine concern. In addition, they daily confront

behaviors that are downright frustrating.

Compulsive reading. Hyperlexic children read everything in sight. It may be hard to get them to sit still long enough to read a children's storybook, but they will read everything else: cereal boxes, traffic signs, fast-food menus, newspaper headlines, advertising slogans, aisle markers in the grocery store, toy packages, scoreboards—whatever happens to be there.

Hyperlexic children just cannot stop themselves. They love visual stimulation, especially if it takes the shape of letters or words. "Wheel of Fortune" is a favorite television show for hyperlexics, even at a very young age. Letters that turn into words and a big, colorful spinning wheel—what more could they ask for? The reading is fun to watch—and never stops amazing people—but parents sometimes wish their children could pay as much attention to other areas as they do to visual stimulation.

Noncompliant behavior. What's so difficult about a little cooperation once in a while? Many parents wonder about this—as their children insist on having their own ways, resist reasonable negotiation, refuse to listen to an explanation without out-shouting the parent, or plop themselves flat out in the middle of a parking lot and scream.

No doubt these things happen in all families. A child can have a very strong will without being hyperlexic. But that strong will is magnified in hyperlexic children. They can hang on even longer than the most persistent child. This behavior stems in part from the rigidity typical of children with this syndrome. They are determined to be in charge. It also comes in part from the fact that these children do not understand what is happening or what is being asked of them. Their language limitation brings about their behavior.

Since they do not understand what others are saying, they take control of the situation themselves. Their response to the confusion, frustration and insecurity they feel—but cannot verbalize—is to behave in a way that drives their parents crazy!

Need for sameness. Sometimes the hard-to-manage behavior comes from a disruption of a familiar routine. If the child expects to get up in the morning, eat the same flavor of instant oatmeal, watch the same sequence of children's programs on public television, eat the same peanut butter sandwich for lunch, and play the usual round of Candyland with Mommy, there may be a problem on the day that Mommy wants to have an early lunch and go to the fabric store before the baby's nap. No time for Candyland can spell big trouble. Explanations may be useless, because hyperlexic children may not understand words such as "early" or "later," and they do not not have the language skills to argue or negotiate for what they want.

Transitions are difficult for hyperlexic children. If there is going to be a change in routine, it is important to prepare the child for it—whether it is skipping Candyland or accepting the presence of a new babysitter. Even taking a new route to the grocery store can cause a reaction that seems way out of proportion to the change in routine.

Out of touch. The hyperlexic child may seem to be in a world all alone. Like Becky, who ran around the gym during circle time, many of these children do not seem to be aware of their surroundings. They are the ones who see the proverbial trees, but not the forest. They cannot be trusted to stay out of the street or to stay with the group on a field trip.

Caleb was enjoying preschool and doing well. One day his class put their jackets on and got ready to go out to the playground. On the way out, Caleb noticed

that another class was sitting in a circle singing. Since he loves to sing, he went and sat down in that circle, oblivious to the activities of his own group. He simply focused on what interested him, not what others were doing or what he had been instructed to do. A child like this can walk through the mall at Christmastime and not notice the prominent Santa display because he is too busy reading the names of the stores.

Short attention span. The attention span of all children is brief; if a child has characteristics of hyperlexia, it is even briefer. Helping a hyperlexic stay focused on one activity for more than a few moments can be quite a challenge for parents and teachers. Very often, this child will leave one task after another unfinished and move on to something else. In contrast, some may have exceedingly long attention spans, but only for activities of their own choosing. For instance, watching television or videos for long stretches of time is appealing because of the constant visual stimulation.

Lack of eye contact. One of the most frustrating parts of communicating with hyperlexic children is not being sure you have their attention. Even if you hold their faces in your hands so they cannot turn their heads, their eyes will shift constantly. Just when you think they are listening to you and you start to speak, their eyes move off to the corner and you do not know whether they will absorb what you say.

Other behaviors also commonly appear in hyperlexic children: self-stimulatory behavior, such as hand-flapping, head-banging or spinning things; a general unexplained sense of anxiety; a specific fear about something unusual; sensitivity to loud noices; frequent tantrums.

By the age of two or three, some hyperlexic chil-

dren display many of these characteristics and appear to be autistic. However, when language comprehension and expression improve, the autistic behaviors diminish or disappear. Remembering that hyperlexia is a language disorder, and not a behavioral disorder, is crucial to helping a child grow past these behaviors. As parents, teachers and therapists develop strategies to improve language and help the children understand what is going on around them or what is expected of them, the children become less anxious, more flexible and more interactive.

As a parent or an adult regularly involved with a hyperlexic child, always remember this principle: *developing language is the key to unlocking the hyperlexic child.*

3

What the research shows

What do we know about hyperlexia? Not nearly as much as we'd like to know.

Professionals and parents alike are befuddled by the curiosities of the syndrome. What causes hyperlexia? Can it be fixed? Once a hyperlexic, always a hyperlexic? Are hyperlexic children autistic?

The phenomenon of children reading words at a much higher level than the language they understand was reported first in the 1940s. It was not until 1967 that the term *hyperlexia* was used to describe these children. In the first real study of the disorder, Silberberg and Silberberg suggested that hyperlexia might be related to a neurological abnormality that makes certain functions of the brain develop to an unusually high level.

In 1972, Mehegan and Dreifuss studied 12 children who began reading before age five. They found a general lack of comprehension of what the children read and disordered language development. Only two of the 12 children were capable of initiating conversation, but all were compulsive readers.

Huttenlocher and Huttenlocher reported in 1973 on three cases where reading developed spontaneously before age five despite obvious problems with lan-

guage. They found that the children in the study could pull out only a small amount of information from what they heard or read.

In 1976 Elliott and Needleman studied one child who recognized words before she was two years old and did not speak at all. She used a typewriter and sentence cards to communicate her needs. In contrast to other studies, Elliott and Needleman concluded that hyperlexia is not a disorder at all; rather they considered it evidence of a high level of mental ability.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Dorothy Aram and Jane Healy have done the most comprehensive study of hyperlexia available so far. Their 1986 study was the first to provide any kind of detail about hyperlexic children. They studied 12 children in northern Ohio. In addition to administering a battery of tests—trying to use tests which none of the children had taken before—they also interviewed the parents very thoroughly. Their structured tests showed many of the deficits other studies suggested, and they saw a lot of abnormal behavior. Of the 12 children in the study, 11 were boys; for reasons no one can explain yet, the vast majority of chidren with hyperlexic traits are male, as is true for most special needs groups.

Aram and Healy's study is particularly interesting because of the information they learned about the families of the 12 children. Most of the mothers loved to read but only one father did. In fact, eight of the 12 fathers had specific reading problems. Eleven of the fathers had some kind of language learning difference, even though one had a master's degree and another was a doctor. In contrast, there was almost no evidence of language learning problems on the maternal side. In the opinion of Aram and Healy, hyperlexia definitely has something to do with genetics.

Experts have not come to any agreement about

what causes hyperlexia, or even exactly how to describe it. However, they do agree that the flip side of the precocious reading is language difficulties. The early reading is all the more remarkable because hyperlexic children have trouble processing or using the very language that they recognize so easily.

DIAGNOSTIC CHARACTERISTICS

When they coined the term *hyperlexia*, Silberberg and Silberberg studied 28 children and concluded that three major criteria should be used to define hyperlexia: (1) discrepancy between recognizing words and understanding; (2) behavior problems; (3) very early reading. Since then, some professionals have maintained the view that hyperlexic children recognize words at an advanced level but are otherwise normal. But this has not been the dominant opinion. The majority of those studying hyperlexia agree that abnormal development in other ways is as much a part of hyperlexia as is the early reading.

As it stands now, there is no "official" medical diagnostic category for children with hyperlexia. Most researchers describe these children in terms of their place on the high end of a continuum of children who are medically diagnosed as having pervasive developmental disorder. The word *pervasive* is used to indicate that the lag in their development affects all areas, including language, motor skills and social abilities. At one end of the spectrum are children considered autistic because of their extreme deficiencies in language and social interaction. However, sometimes the explanation is not that clear. In these cases, the phrase "pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified" (PDD NOS) may be used.

These categories are sometimes criticized as being too broad. Many professionals see the syndrome of hyperlexia as a subgroup of PDD NOS. Some (Cohen, Campbell and Gelardo) see it as a variant of develop-

mental aphasia, or a developmental impairment of language. The theory behind this view is that the brains of children with hyperlexia are organized differently from the norm, particularly in the language areas.

Most hyperlexic children are brought to the attention of professionals because they do not start talking when they should, or because they obviously do not understand such simple things as "Don't touch the stove—it's hot." Past studies have included relatively small numbers of children. But they show consistently that particular areas of language are difficult for hyperlexics.

Medical professionals use the words *delayed* and *interrupted milestones* to say that some children do not make the same developmental progress as do most others. Related to language, this means that some children did not speak their first words or sentences as soon as they were expected to, and that other children seemed to develop normally at first and then stopped developing or actually regressed.

Certain abstract aspects of language, such as questions and word associations, are troublesome for hyperlexics. Some mysterious link simply does not happen in their brains. Behavior that looks like defiant refusal to obey may occur simply because the child does not understand the instruction.

It is hard for hyperlexics to paraphrase a story or recount something they experienced. He or she may know the story but not be able to tell it. Further, most hyperlexic children have difficulty responding to *Wh* questions that might be used to prompt their responses in storytelling.

Grammar is puzzling. Children with characteristics of hyperlexia are not able to pull apart the language they hear, break it down, and rearrange it to express their own thoughts. Consequently, echolalia is very common: they literally echo back what they hear

in whole chunks. Instead of an amusing conversation, an unknowing friendly adult is met by a little echo repeating everything that is said, or the child responds to "How are you?" with dialogue from a favorite video. And when a hyperlexic does express his or her original thought, it most likely will take the form of some chunk that was stored away as a whole but never broken down into grammatical parts.

BEYOND CURIOSITY

The studies are not exhaustive by any means. There have been relatively few and these involve small numbers of children. However, it is worth noting that they all have concentrated on defining hyperlexia—just what is it? What characteristics or problems must be present to say with certainty that a child has hyperlexia and not autism or another language disorder? How superior does the word recognition skill have to be? What is the relationship between intelligence and hyperlexia?

These are all interesting questions, and having the answers would shed some light on a great mystery. However, for parents, the central concern is a more practical one. What can be done to help my child?

Phyllis Kupperman and Sally Bligh, speech and language pathologists, are recognized experts in developing teaching strategies for filling in the holes for hyperlexic children. They have reviewed the professional studies on this subject, taken a close-up look at some of the children in their caseloads, and aggressively challenged hyperlexia. Simply knowing the deficits is not good enough; merely making the correct diagnosis does not help the child acquire language. Kupperman and Bligh believe in getting down on the floor with the children to help kids grasp the abstract concepts that have eluded and frustrated them. Co-founders of the Center for Speech and Language Disorders in Illinois, and now in separate practices,

they coach parents into being co-therapists and stress the importance of the parents' daily role in giving their children the social and language skills they lack.

In 1992, the Center for Speech and Language Disorders held its eighth annual Conference on the Language Disordered Child and devoted the entire two days to the subject of hyperlexia. This was the first time a substantial group of professionals and parents gathered to discuss and learn about hyperlexia.

A group of parents whose hyperlexic children were receiving therapy at the Center for Speech and Language Disorders formed a support group in 1991. What initially began as support for parents with similar struggles and frustrations grew into the American Hyperlexia Association. This organization is committed to raising the awareness of hyperlexia among the professional community and society at large, as well as improving society's response to the unique needs of hyperlexic children.

Many questions about hyperlexia have yet to be answered—or may never be answered. But at least there is a movement to bring children who read too soon out of the realm of curiosity and into the world of therapy and social services—services that will help them develop into independent adults fully connected to the world around them.

4

Challenges and resources of hyperlexia

Parents of hyperlexic children find reassurance in knowing there are other children like theirs and other people interested in helping them. Knowing the word and learning its history is also interesting. But what does all this have to do with living day by day with a child who displays these unique characteristics? Undeniably, there are unique challenges to that task; but there are also unique resources.

Challenges

On some days, what parents want most is for a child to be asleep! Parenting a child with special needs takes an extra dose of stamina. The well of patience runs dry sometimes, and even the most conscientious parents need a break from the constant demands of the bundle of activity who is their son or daughter.

Ideally, the goal is positive parenting—relating to a child in a patient, deliberate way to bring about leaps in language and keep undesirable behavior to a minimum. You can have a lot of fun with your child as you make learning a game, but sometimes other demands make that approach impractical, and "just-get-me-through-this-day" is more to the point.

Priorities. A key tip for worn-out parents or caregivers is to choose your battles. This is not to say that it is in the family's best interest to let the hyperlexic child take charge of everything he or she wants to do. It does mean that not everything that is unacceptable according to your ideal standards is worth a major encounter. When your first instinct is to say no to a specific request your child makes, take a moment and think whether any harm will come from saying yes. If John wants to sleep with a can of tomato soup tucked under his arm, let him; or if he insists he needs barbeque sauce on his cheese sandwich, hand him the bottle. If he wants to put the cat in the clothes dryer, firmly intervene. Save your energy for when it is important that he learn to follow the rules.

Strategies. Consider these basic facts:

- You know your child better than anyone else;
- You are the one who can see what concepts are not sinking in;
- You know what activities interest your child.

These three pieces of information are your ammunition. The target to aim at is the creative link between normal, everyday activities and the cognitive development that needs special attention. Use your ammunition and aim at that target.

The hyperlexic child learns best when taught in a very deliberate way. Parents are always on the lookout for practical, concrete ways to teach new concepts to their kids. Finding the creative link between playing and learning is a daily challenge. It can be fun, too. You can play with your child and teach at the same time.

Because interests change and cognitive needs change, keep looking for new ways to link the two together.

Limits. Many children with hyperlexic qualities are quite content to be in a world of their own much of the time. A list of the challenges of parenting a hyperlexic child must include the task of getting the child to "come out and stay out" for a period of time. There are limits, but you will easily see them. David may be very cooperative for his teacher all morning, but when he comes home he cannot even make eye contact with his mother. He has used up his daily quota of connectedness. Carrie may agree to look at a book, but after the first four pages she decides she would rather spend the time spelling words with plastic letters.

Don't be afraid to take the initiative to draw your child into an activity that requires focus or interaction. Get out an activity book; take a walk; schedule structured times to work on specific concepts. At the same time, recognize the limits, and don't make everyone miserable by insisting on more than your child can give. Gradually try to lengthen the period of time that your child is involved in what is going on around him or her, but accept retreat when your child needs a break.

Resources

The good news is that there is a lot in your child's favor. Parenting or caring for a hyperlexic child requires intentional forethought, alertness to opportunities, and an understanding of the special needs that come with hyperlexia. But hyperlexia itself offers a solid place to start.

Intelligence. Intelligence is not impaired by hyperlexia. While it is true that some hyperlexic children score poorly on intelligence tests, the reason very well may be the way the questions are asked, not any basic deficiency in intelligence. Séamus, who had been asked to leave a preschool because of his disruptive behavior, went through several rounds of testing.

During preschool testing, the traditional Stanford-Binet IQ test gave a result of 88 and then 94, both slightly below average. However, independent testing given at kindergarten age revealed that Séamus's IQ was 120—above average. If a test is based on the very language concepts that are difficult for a hyperlexic child—for example, questions that begin with *Wh*—it hardly seems fair to judge the child's intelligence by that standard. The right sort of test usually shows that a hyperlexic has at least normal intelligence.

Learning skills. While hyperlexics learn in unusual ways, the important thing to remember is that they do learn. Their unique learning skills can be identified and used to teach the concepts and skills they have not picked up in the usual way. You may have to resort to unorthodox methods to teach your child English, but he or she can learn. In fact, hyperlexic children are actually very quick to catch on to new things if the concepts are presented in the right way. Also make the most of a child's current interests. For instance, if your child responds to commercials, put school assignments in a jingle. If he or she is currently fixated on dinosaurs, use dinosaur examples. Instead of insisting that your child conform to "normal" learning patterns, observe how he or she learns and use that method to teach something new.

Reading. Most importantly, the precocious reading skill, which is phenomenally cute, is the best thing in the child's favor. It is quite possible for children to have similar language disorders but not be able to read. Parents and teachers must find another way to unlock learning for those children. But your child can read; you already know that he or she is fascinated with words. A key strategy for unlocking the language of a hyperlexic child is to use reading as a learning tool and for behavioral management. The written word

is concrete. Whereas the spoken word flies by before the child can grab hold of it and process its meaning, the written word stays in one place. This allows the child to go back to it and look at it as long as necessary to figure out what it means.

The challenges can be overwhelming; no one will deny that. But doing an inventory of what your child has in his or her favor can shrink the mountains into manageable hills.

5

The hyperlexic learning style

"It's like he's learning another language!"

Robyn sat with three-year-old Taylor in the office of a language therapist explaining the curious patterns of her son's speech. As a high school foreign language teacher, Robyn was familiar with the predictable barriers her students came up against when they tried to learn French—and her small son was hitting every one of them in his attempt to learn English. Without having heard the term *hyperlexia*, Robyn recognized the strange way Taylor was learning to talk and knew well the blank stares that came from not understanding the langauge around him. It might as well have been French to Taylor.

Imagine you're in another country with your phrase book tucked securely in your pocket. When you need to find the museum, you pull out your book and look up the phrase that translates, "How far is it to the museum?" When you're hungry, you look up, "Where is the restaurant?" When you're tired, you get in the taxi and look up, "Take me to the hotel."

You manage to get through the day, but how much of the language have you actually learned? Do you know which words are verbs? Pronouns? Nouns? Can you take the individual parts of those phrases and mix

and match them to make up a sentence that is not in your phrase book?

This is a hard task—and it is what the child with symptoms of hyperlexia has to do. Linguists believe that it is easier for a child to learn a second language than it is for an adult. At around age 12, the child crosses a threshold and it becomes more difficult to acquire a second language. However, young hyperlexic children have trouble learning English, because the task is as hard for them as learning a second language after the age of 12 is for other people.

NO BACK-UP LANGUAGE

In the foreign land of hyperlexia, the children do not have the advantage of a phrase book to look at. They don't have a first language to fall back on. They only have their eyes and ears and a blank slate to record what they observe. What do they "write" on this blank slate? Anything and everything. Children with characteristics of hyperlexia tend to have strong memories for what they see and hear.

David's teacher is amused by his ability to repeat everything that is said in the classroom, word-for-word, exactly as it was spoken. This can be funny to watch, especially if he stands next to the teacher and mimics gestures along with repeating the words. But when David does this it is not because he sets out to entertain the class. It is because he has a gestalt approach to learning language. His strong memory lets him store and retrieve chunks or phrases—or even whole conversations. The system breaks down when these chunks must be dissected and rearranged to form original thoughts. This is a challenge for hyperlexic kids.

Hand in hand with gestalt processing of language goes the characteristic of echolalia. What you say, he says. You ask a question and expect an answer, but what you get is the same question echoed back. You

make a comment and hope for a reaction, but you get a repetition of the same comment you made. The child may have a sense that a response is appropriate; but since he doesn't have words of his own, he uses yours. Having heard the phrase from you and repeated it back, the child now stores that bit of information until a time when it seems useful. Then you will hear the whole phrase again, in a gestalt manner.

Patrick and his mother had just spent a pleasant day together away from home. On the way home in the car, Martha said, "That was fun, wasn't it?" Patrick replied, "Yeah, Mom, that was great sex!"

Patrick had picked up a phrase from a movie or television and tried to apply it without really understanding it.

Children with hyperlexic characteristics are creatures of habit, if ever there were such a thing. They like things to be the same. *Exactly* the same. One speech and language pathologist commented that she has to be very careful about how she handles the first session with a hyperlexic child, because the child will expect future sessions to be just the same. For eight or ten sessions in a row, Caleb insisted on putting together a floor puzzle of the United States, and because one time he and his mother stopped at a fast-food restaurant on the way to therapy, getting a roast beef sandwich now has to be part of the ritual.

Just as they echo language without modifying it appropriately, hyperlexics prefer that routines and habits not be interrupted. They constantly look for—and find—patterns all around them: the route to the grocery store (there can only be one), the sequence of bedtime stories, the television schedule ("What do you mean, 'Wheel of Fortune' is not on tonight?") the same puzzle day after day, the number of houses the bus stops at on the way home. Their language is built around chunks that do not get broken up, and their behavior follows a similar principle. The child who

prefers the security of the familiar is likely to resist a parent or teacher's attempt to break up a "behavioral chunk."

Language and behavior can be taught very specifically. It is important to understand that hyperlexic children will not "pick up" from the culture around them the way most children do. Given a demonstration or visual model, however, these children can use their strong memories to their advantage.

LANGUAGE AND BEHAVIOR

Caleb's parents met with a skeptical school psychologist who was not convinced that the out-of-control behavior she observed was linked to language difficulties. His parents argued that if his language improved, his behavior would settle down. "But how can he learn anything if he won't sit still and pay attention?" the psychologist asked.

This question is worth asking. Teachers and therapists of children with hyperlexic symptoms confirm that improved language does result in improved behavior. But how do you jump the behavior hurdle to get to the language?

In a presentation given at the Eighth Annual Conference on the Language Disordered Child held in Oak Brook, Illinois in November 1992, Dr. Jane Healy used an illustration that defined the main functions of various parts of the brain. The cortex is the thinking part; here language is learned and abstract thinking develops. In contrast, the "reptilian" part of the brain is the most primitive part; its function is to keep you safe from the environment. The reptile is constantly in a state of waiting to be stimulated by the environment. Reptilian responses are based on reflex—finding food to survive, fleeing from attack, even aggressively attacking for self-preservation.

If a child's "reptile" brain is under too much stress from the environment—the physical and emotional

surroundings—the cortex has no chance to be receptive to learning more complicated concepts. The reptilian part of the brain tends to be dominant in children who do not understand the world around them. The goal is to get the higher center of the brain in control of the lower center.

How do we do this? Healy's answer is, "Make the child feel safe." If the child feels threatened or scared, you will see reflex, not cortical learning. A hug may be more effective than a scolding to prevent the behavior blow-up. At these moments, step back from the language issue and figure out why the child is feeling insecure.

Sometimes insecurity results simply from encountering the unfamliar. Prepare the child for changes or new physical experiences before they happen. For instance, let the child feel safe and successful in a play group of three or four children before enrolling him or her in a preschool class of 15.

Try to help the distressed child downshift from the vigilant reptilian state by reducing the stress in the physical environment. This may mean offering simple explanations of what is happening. More often it means changing the physical circumstances. You can physically remove the child from the stressful situation, such as a noisy, crowded room, so that the reptile impulse can subside and the cortex can take control. Or you can remove something from the environment that is causing difficulty for the child. After the physical circumstances are controlled and the child feels safe, an explanation may be possible.

Concrete vs. symbolic learning

Most children learn through play. Many successful preschool programs are built on this theory. The kids have a grand time playing in the sandbox or the water table without realizing that they are learning science or art or language. They focus heavily on concrete

touch-and-feel experiences before moving up into the symbolic realm of reading.

In contrast, children with hyperlexia focus on the symbolic at the start. They learn to read before they talk. They use blocks to form letters rather than to build towers. They look at the legs supporting a table and see an *H*. They need to be led back to the basics of play in order to catch up on the concrete experience they often prefer to skip. Rather than discovering cause and effect through play, for instance, they need to be shown, visually and intentionally, that one thing causes another.

"Get your children back into the sandbox," Dr. Healy says, "back to the water table, back to climbing trees, back to simple things. Don't focus on the symbolic to the exclusion of building those concrete skills."

In other words, help your child stay in touch with the physical environment. Find ways to explore it together so that it becomes less threatening. Help your child master the skills that involve touching and feeling the real world. While other children can discover concepts and principles on their own through play, the hyperlexic child needs concrete demonstrations.

If a child can process the stimulation from physical surroundings more successfully, anxiety will lessen, the reptile will take a rest, and real learning can begin. Then language skills can be addressed head-on.

6

Principles to teach by

Hyperlexic children learn in unusual ways; there is no doubt about that. Understanding this unique learning process is the foundation for effectively teaching language and abstract concepts. Building on the strengths of hyperlexia is the most effective way to help the hyperlexic discover and enjoy using language. Throw away any preconceptions you have about how children learn language in general. Focus on how *your* child learns language, and jump off from there.

Parents and therapists have found many creative and successful ways to jump the language hurdles. These strategies are built on a three-step process:

1. Understand the hyperlexic learning style.
2. Observe and listen to the child to find the holes in language development.
3. Create concrete, specific activities that use this unusual learning style as a way to fill up the holes.

WRITE, WRITE, WRITE

Write, write, write, because the hyperlexic child will read, read, read.

If you live with a hyperlexic child or see one often, then you know that saying things over and over results in nothing but laryngitis and exasperation. Preschool hyperlexic children do not understand everything they read in a book or magazine or on the back of a cereal box. But if you write clear sentences aimed at their level of understanding, you will find they may pay more attention to your notes than to your voice.

It takes time and trouble to scrounge up a pencil and paper sometimes, but it is worth the effort. Take a few extra steps and save your voice. Don't wait until your child is in first grade to make use of the reading skill. Writing things down is a foundational strategy that can be applied in dozens of ways.

At three-and-a-half, Trent suddenly became anxious whenever separated from his mother. Experts recommend that you explain to the anxious child where you are going and when you will be back. For Trent's mother, this was a wasted effort. He wailed right through her patient explanations and clung to her neck. The turnaround came when she took an index card and wrote a brief sequence for Trent. When he was left with a babysitter, for instance, he could hold the card and read it periodically:

1. Cathy comes to stay with Trent.
2. Mommy goes to the store.
3. Trent plays with Cathy.
4. Mommy comes back to hug Trent.

It worked! Trent's fears subsided, because through the written sequence, he understood what was going on.

Caleb clamored for his mother's attention on a busy Saturday. He wanted to play a game, and he wanted to do it now! His mother's response of "just a minute" was not working. She was willing to play the

game but needed a few minutes for a phone call and several small tasks. As the volume and frequency of Caleb's requests increased, she realized she had to take time to write something down.

Things to Do Today

1. Wash the dishes.
2. Call the doctor.
3. Clean up the bedroom.
4. Play game with Caleb.
5. Do laundry.
6. Go to the grocery store.

The list went on for quite a while. Caleb and his mother read the list together, and he was reassured that playing the game was on it. After that, Caleb waited patiently for the first few items to be completed. After the game, he even helped out with the rest of the day's activities.

Children who can read words and numbers can understand how a calendar works. Writing activities or special events in the squares of a calendar helps a child visualize when things are going to happen. Your child can check off each day as it passes and point to the birthday party next Tuesday or the trip to Grandma's house next weekend. Reading becomes a way of helping your child be aware of the family's activities and to look forward to participating in them.

A list of rules is another good idea. You must relax your decorating standards a bit, but it will not be forever. Take a large piece of paper, such as off an easel pad, and write a list of rules for your child. He or she may even like to help compose them. If so, be sure to include what your child says, carefully wording it so that it conforms with your goals. One child's list reads something like this:

David's Rules

1. David will obey Mommy and Daddy.
2. David will kiss Mommy!
3. David will be kind to Tricia (his sister).
4. David will play with Daddy.
5. David will eat supper at the table.

The rules are stated positively, and some are thrown in for fun. They all contribute to David's learning appropriate behavior that will make it easier for him to get along in general. David, in fact, quickly memorized the rules. When he was caught being mean to Tricia, for instance, his mother simply said "What is rule number three?" and David responded by putting his arms around his little sister. The visual reminder stayed taped to the dining room door for a long time, but Mommy spent a lot less time scolding David.

BUILD MODELS

Patterns are everywhere, and hyperlexic children see them before most people. Grammar is full of inconsistent rules and verb forms that hyperlexics are not able to categorize and apply correctly. But they can learn those rules and verb forms through patterns.

Trent would hear his mother say, "Do you want some apple juice?" Rather than picking apart the sentence structure and pronouns, Trent memorized the whole phrase and stored it away for future use. Then when he wanted apple juice, he would say to his mother, "Do you want some apple juice?" After she saw what was going on, she learned to say back to him, "I want some apple juice," and soon this memorized phrase replaced the inappropriate one. Once the pattern was established, Trent's parents could suggest substitutions, such as "I want some milk" or "I want a hamburger, please." Trent learned a basic skill that improved his interaction with other adults, as well.

If your child does not pick up on a pattern like this simply by hearing it a few times, write it down. If your child asks for juice by saying, "Do you want some apple juice?" get out a pad of paper or go to the chalkboard and write, "I want some apple juice, please." Ask your child to read it back to you, and then promptly respond by fulfilling the request. He or she will begin to see the usefulness of language.

Remember David, the boy who could not retrieve his cup from under the table? Probably his mother is annoyed that he had crawled under the table with the cup in the first place, but she has the perfect opportunity to model the concept of *Where*. She could take David to the table, squat down and say, "Where is the cup? The cup is under the table." Asking a question and then giving the answer forms a pattern. She might give the same sequence several times until he can repeat it to her. If David does not catch on to the pattern through oral repetition, she could write a few questions and answers and ask him to read them, keeping David in view of the table and the cup during the process.

Once the pattern is established, substitutions can be made. David's mother might put the cup on the table and say, "Where is the cup? The cup is on the table." Then she can take the cup away, put a book in its place, and say, "Where is the book? The book is on the table."

Help your child learn appropriate responses to common questions by modeling the questions and answers in a regular pattern. Listen to the things that other people say to your child and then practice those things. Work on simple interactions such as:

"How old are you?"
"I am four years old."
"How are you?"
"I am fine."

"What's your name?"
"My name is Adam."
"Would you like some apple juice?"
"Yes, please."
"When is your birthday?"
"My birthday is November 29."

Then when some well-meaning person asks one of these common questions, your child will be able to answer appropriately instead of running across the room because of insecure feelings. By learning a pattern, your child will discover a functional language tool as well as an appropriate social skill.

THINK POSITIVELY

Hyperlexic children respond well to a tangible and visual reward system. Use stickers, charts and small prizes to motivate them to appropriate behavior and learning achievements. Avoid taking away earned rewards as punishment. This often makes the child anxious because it is too difficult to understand why something earned has been taken away.

When your child repeats that pattern you have worked on so hard, be sure to let him or her know that you are pleased—especially if you see the new skill being used in a social setting. Praise every new appropriate use of language, whether it is something your child says for the first time or something he or she finally responds to appropriately. Reinforce this achievement by providing another opportunity to demonstrate the skill soon.

Séamus's parents made a short list of behaviors that he needed to learn, such as not climbing on the furniture. This list was posted on the refrigerator. At the end of each day, they reviewed each item with Séamus. If he had in fact refrained from climbing on the furniture, he got a star to put in that square on the chart. When he collected a specified number of

stars, he was entitled to a small toy or treat.

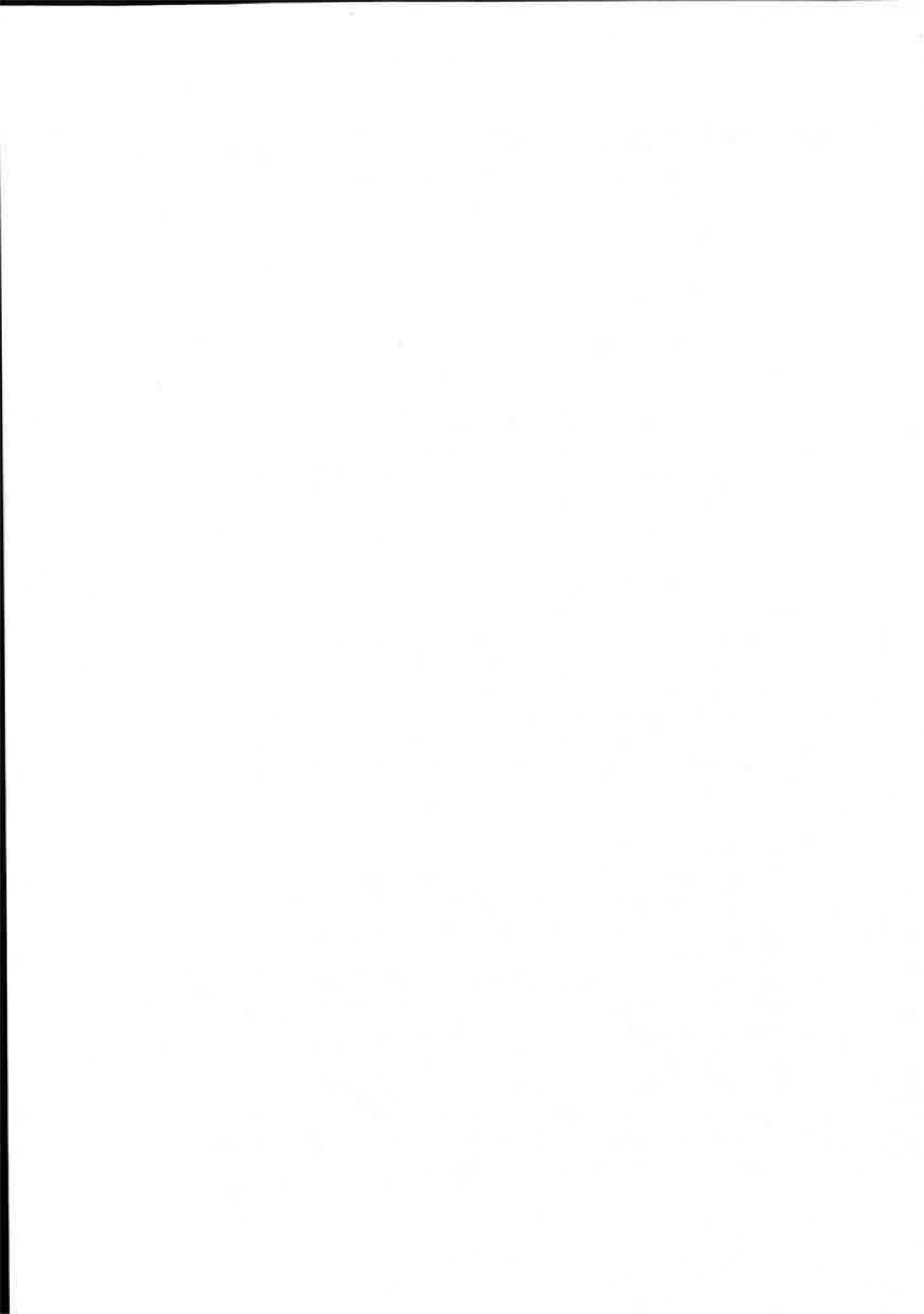
Demonstrate

Just as you are deliberate in teaching "Where is the cup? The cup is on the table," be aware of less obvious dimensions of language that your child needs to learn. For instance, many hyperlexic children do not seem capable of imaginary play. Left to themselves, they generally do not choose to play store, have tea parties, or make up stories with little figures. So you need to get down on the floor with the plastic dishes and show your child how to do this. Imaginary play is important not only because it contributes to abstract thinking but because it gives your child appropriate skills for playing with other children.

Most likely, your child will not know what to say. She looks in the cup, does not see any tea and wonders what you are so excited about. But stay excited. Stir! Sip! Talk! Say how good the tea is and offer some to your child. Even go so far as to script the dialog and let your child read it and practice the social interaction with you. Whether it's G.I. Joe, Winnie the-Pooh or Thomas the Tank Engine, pick up the characters and give your child some lines to say.

Be visual as much as possible to reinforce and clarify what your child hears. *Model patterns* of specific functional language patterns and then use substitutions to broaden the ways your child can apply them. *Positively reward* your child for the achievements he or she makes. And *demonstrate* the skills everyone needs to learn to be part of a group, whether playing with one other child, being in a classroom or facing a larger part of society.

Yes, it's hard to get your child's attention for very long. Rather than be frustrated that he or she cannot pay attention to you for 40 minutes, use the 90-second windows of opportunity. It's worth it.



7

Common language glitches

Hyperlexia is not a box that we put some children in and find that they fit perfectly. Parents, teachers and speech and language pathologists who compare notes quickly discover that there is a range of behaviors and abilities in hyperlexic children. Some are aggressive while others are not; some have more severe problems with receptive or expressive language than others; some love school, some hate it; some have wonderful fine motor skills while others lag behind; some read by sight, some by phonics. In the end, we must remember that the hyperlexic child is not simply hyperlexic; he or she is also a child and an individual. And there are always differences between individuals.

Certain trouble spots are typical, though, as the hyperlexic child learns language. Although the degree of difficulty may vary, the challenging aspects of language are fairly predictable. Knowing in advance where the dead ends are helps immeasurably in guiding the child through the language maze.

Questions

What is the boy doing? Where did you eat lunch? When did you get that new shirt? Who is your best

friend? Are you hungry? Which block is bigger and which is smaller? How old are you? How did you do that?

Simple questions that people ask preschoolers all the time, right? But they are not so simple for the hyperlexic child to answer. Some of these questions (*when, how*) are actually quite abstract, but even a *yes/no* question may confuse a child. He or she may decide to run across the room and spin a toy instead of giving you the information you ask for.

The first tip, of course, is to write things down. Second, give your child a cue about how to answer the question. Instead of saying, "Are you hungry?" write, "Are you hungry? Yes or no." The fact that this question requires a yes/no answer is not obvious to the child. When you give a hint, he or she will do better at responding. Write down the answer: "Yes, I'm hungry." It might be helpful to follow that question with another that requires a similar answer: "Do you want a hot dog? Yes or no." Help your child answer this one by the same method. This establishes a pattern which the hyperlexic child will recognize and be able to use to answer accurately other *yes/no* questions. Gradually phase out the "yes or no" step between the question and the answer, but don't be afraid to come back to it in the future when you ask a *yes/no* question and don't get an appropriate answer.

Questions beginning with *Wh* are a particular problem for hyperlexics. *What, Which* and *Where* are fairly concrete concepts (although they have abstract dimensions also). You can begin teaching a child these words through visual techniques. Set the bowl on the table and say, "Where is the bowl? The bowl is on the table." Lay two clean shirts on the bed and say, "Which shirt do you want to wear, the red one or the blue one?"

When and *Why* (and *How*) are more abstract and require some degree of reasoning. Understanding and

using these words come later in normal language development and also for the hyperlexic. But they can be taught through the same model. Ask the child a *Why* question, and then say, "Because. . ." to establish the pattern that the answer to *Why* should start with *Because*. A calendar is useful to help a child learn *When*. You can visually show the days until it is time to go on a trip or to a party. For the child who does not tell time, a digital clock helps; he or she can see the numbers change and know that when 4:30 appears, "Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?" will come on television.

You might begin to feel as if you are shuffling around the house muttering to yourself, "Did you take a bath? Yes or no." "Do you want apple juice? Yes or no." But try to develop the habit of giving your child the proper models for questions and answers in a routine way.

Other people may look at you oddly if they do not understand what is going on, but *you* know what is going on. That's what is important. The payoff will come. One day out of the blue, your child will ask an original question and look at you sincerely, waiting for an answer. Shirley looks back at her son Steven's development and says, "His first *Why* question was the best Christmas present I ever got." When that happens, you will know that your child has grasped the functional purpose of questions—to find out information.

Using the question-answer pattern of exchanging information opens up a whole new realm of language for the hyperlexic child—just as it does for any other child. It becomes a hook the child can use to engage in conversation, and it and encourages talking about things that interest him or her.

Associations

The picture shows three oranges and an apple,

and your daughter cannot tell you which one does not belong. Or the page in the coloring book has three identical clowns and a fourth with a different hat, but your son cannot pick out the one that is different.

Hyperlexic children have an incredible capacity to soak up tidbits of information. The difficulty comes when they need to sort out and organize that data. Just as they have trouble picking apart grammar and constructing their own sentences, it is hard for hyperlexics to categorize objects. It is not necessarily that they do not see the different hat on the fourth clown, but the difference seems to have no significance. Start asking simple yes/no questions about the hats and you will find that even if they identify correctly that three hats are blue but the fourth is red, they will have trouble grasping that the difference is significant. They may also have trouble understanding the word "different" or the phrase "does not belong." If this happens, demonstrate by covering up the picture that is different as you explain that it does not belong. Removing the item from view makes the point that it should not be there in the first place.

Caleb's parents discovered that he was not categorizing objects so they took an aggressive approach to teaching him about categories. His mother took 25 or 30 sheets of paper and wrote on the top of each, "Things that are . . ." and created a category for each page. Then she listed four or five things that fell into that category. Things that are round: buttons, coins, wheels, SpaghettiOs, etc. For several weeks, the walls of Caleb's bedroom were plastered with these mini-posters of categories—animals, fruits, clothing, colors—all things Caleb could observe as part of his everyday routine.

Each night, bedtime was accompanied by a playful category game. At first, for instance, Caleb's mother might say, "Tell me something that is round," and Caleb would look at the list and call out an appropri-

ate item. After a few nights, she started asking questions: "Is a shoe round?" Caleb would laugh at the absurdity and answer correctly, "No." The next step was to ask Caleb to think of something round that was not already on the list.

The system worked—a combination of visual stimulation and repetition of a pattern. Caleb first learned to think about categories by looking at words, then he was able to successfully transfer that skill to pictures. Now he could open up an ordinary preschool coloring book and correctly answer that the apple did not belong with the oranges.

Hyperlexic children may learn a concept in one form but not be able to reverse it. For instance, a child may correctly respond to "Tell me something that is round," but still have trouble with "What shape is a ball?" It is important to demonstrate the concept for the child from both angles.

Sometimes the child understands the concept as you work on the structured exercise but is not able to answer a similar question out of that context. Don't be discouraged. Your effort is not wasted. Look for ways to demonstrate that the principle is the same.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Cause and effect is a difficult concept to grasp because it involves a level of mental processing that most hyperlexic children are not adept at. *If . . . then . . .* or *What if . . .* call for the child to consider the information available and make a conclusion. The child may understand each part of the equation separately but not be able to link them together logically. But cause and effect happen constantly in everyday life; the hyperlexic person simply needs a little help recognizing it.

John's mother stood in the doorway, her hand poised over the light switch. "What will happen if I flip this switch?" she asked. Before John had time to

shrug and run out of the room, she enthusiastically answered her own question: "The light will come on!" And then she flipped the switch to demonstrate the principle—cause and effect in action.

Meghan wanted to watch a video, but her mother wanted Meghan to finish lunch. "If you eat your lunch," she said, "then you can watch the video." To reinforce this concept, she wrote on the chalkboard in the kitchen:

1. Eat lunch.
2. Watch video.

Meghan's mother used an ordinary situation to present the concept of *If. . . then.* Because Meghan understands lists, she saw that eating lunch had to come before watching the video. She also saw that the consequence of not eating lunch was not watching the video.

SEQUENCES

Sequences are related to that abstract notion of *When.* Concepts like *first/next/last* or *before/after* and other words placing events in time are confusing. Once again, lists can be very helpful. Once a child is familiar with a numbered list putting things in a sequential order, try substituting temporal words for the numbers.

1. Eat breakfast.	**First, eat breakfast.**
2. Get dressed.	**Next, get dressed.**
3. Go to school.	**Last, go to school.**

Looking at several related pictures and figuring out which one ought to come first can be an unmanageable task for these children. This is a common task in preschool education. Your child might need some extra help—like some written words to go along with

the pictures. Try writing captions for the pictures. You can either attach them to the pictures or ask your child to match them appropriately. If he or she does not seem to be able to extract what is important in the pictures, as is likely the case, ask simple *yes/no* questions about what is happening and then add the captions. Let the child read the captions in a sequential order that summarizes the story. Gradually phase out the captions but use the same set of pictures. Then try adding a new set of pictures.

BE ALERT

Several other dimensions of language confuse the hyperlexic child: multiple meanings of a word, irregular verbs, pronouns, tense, analogies, idioms or phrases that should not be taken literally, and descriptive words. These are the glitches. Learn what they are and watch for the holes to show up in your child's language development. The strategy for filling those holes remains constant: *be visual, model specific patterns, be positive, and demonstrate what you are trying to teach.* These are effective guidelines—but they allow for a great deal of creativity. Combine them with your knowledge of your own child, and let your creativity flow.

8

Techniques for teaching

Tackling the task of parenting a child with special needs takes a lot of determination. A common feeling among parents is a sense of helplessness. They schedule the therapy sessions, they check out the school systems, but the lingering question is, "What can *I* do for my own child?"

Happily, there is a lot you can do for a child. Countless activities that seem like games to children also build language skills. Whether your household routine lets you have a regular scheduled time for language-building activities or whether you have to snatch the three-minute opportunities when they come, you can have an active part in teaching your child language—and open up the whole world by doing so.

Understanding how your child learns is a foundation to build on. Teachers and speech and language pathologists offer models to learn from. Ultimately, your child will let you know what he or she is interested in. Go from there, and enjoy your child.

What follows here is a list of activities that have been helpful to other parents and children facing hyperlexia. Some of them have already been mentioned in previous chapters. Try these out, but don't limit

yourself to these ideas. Use them as a starting place to find what works for your child.

Story and Sequence

1. What I Did Today. Incorporate a new activity into the evening routine. Take a few minutes to ask your child to dictate a list of the things he or she did that day. Initially, you can show how to make a list by writing down what you know about the child's activities. Let the child add to the list. Gradually the child will begin to generate more and more of the list.

2. Computer Capers. Most kids have a natural interest in computers—pushing buttons and seeing what comes up on the screen. Let your child dictate a story and type what he or she says. Because hyperlexic children learn through what they see, it is critical to fix up the grammar and vocabulary. Otherwise, the child sees the mistakes and incorrect language becomes wired into the child's mind. When the story is finished, let the child read it to you. Don't worry if at first the stories are the same every time. Introduce the process, and phase in the changes gradually. Try suggesting a new story subject by typing, "This is a story about. . ." and filling in something meaningful to the child. The child may resist at first, but keep trying.

3. Picture-label Match-up. If your child has trouble putting a set of four or five pictures in an approriate sequence, try labeling the pictures with descriptive captions. Include numbers to help the child see that the point is to put the picture in a sequence. Later separate the pictures and the captions and let your child match them up. Each time stress the concept of sequence by using temporal words: "What did she do *first?*" or "What should she do *next?*"

4. My Vacation Book. Take a lot of pictures on your next outing or vacation—or even during an ordinary week—and make a book about your child's experience. Write descriptions of each activity to help the child remember the trip and be able to tell other people about it.

5. Things to Do Today. Work together with your child to generate a list of things to do on a given day, including routine activities like eating breakfast as well as special activities. Or, you could break a task down into parts by making a list: "Things to Do to Get Dressed."

6. My Turn, Your Turn. Make up a story using your child's favorite characters. Start the story with a sentence or two, and then leave a sentence unfinished and let the child complete the thought and continue the story. If your child drifts into reciting a memorized or printed story, jump in quickly with a new twist in the plot. You can even introduce problems that the characters face and let your child suggest the solutions and ending to the story.

Questions and Answers

7. 20 Questions. Take turns asking questions about a specific object or person. First try asking questions about an object your child can see. Use a variety of *yes/no* and *Wh* questions. Coach your child to answer accurately. Then let the child practice formulating questions. Later, advance to the same format with an object that is unknown.

8. Jeopardy. Sketch out a simple chart in the format of the "Jeopardy!" game show. Across the top, write three or four categories, such as "books," "family," "toys," "foods," "clothes." Then fill in the chart with

numbers in each column from 100 to 500, representing increasing levels of difficulty in the questions. When the child selects a category and amount, you give the answer and let the child formulate an appropriate question.

CATEGORIES AND ASSOCIATIONS

9. Category Posters. Make a set of mini-posters containing lists of various categories: fruits, things that are round, things that go, things to wear in the winter, etc. Put these up on the wall of your child's room or somewhere else in the house. Ask your child to tell you something from a particular category and allow him or her to look at the list while responding. Gradually introduce variations: suggest something that might or might not belong in a particular category and ask your child to tell you if it belongs. Or challenge your child to tell you something that fits the category that is not already on the list. You can put up a lot of posters all at once, or you can use a few and change them frequently.

10. Things that Start With. . . Depending on fine motor skills, your child may write or dictate a list of things that begin with a given letter of the alphabet. Encourage him or her to think of at least 10 things that belong on the list.

11. Catalog Cut-up. There are two variations of this technique. You might begin by cutting out items from old catalogs or magazines that logically belong together. Cut things out in groups of four. Then present four pictures to your child, three of which belong together and a fourth that does not. Let him or her pick out the one that does not belong.

You might like to have your child do the cutting out. Suggest a category, such as toys, tools or animals

and challenge your child to find pictures that fit that category. Paste these on a piece of paper to make a collage for the child to keep.

12. Anticipation Cards. Make a set of flash cards with opposite words on either side. Use your child's rote learning skills to drill opposites and encourage your child to anticipate what the other side of the card will be. For many basic concepts, you can physically demonstrate the concept on the card (over/under the table, high ceiling/low floor).

13. Analogy Cards. On an index card, write out the two sides of an analogy, leaving one element blank:

grass green, snow ___________

Help your child find the implied question. Analyze the first part in order to figure out the similar question in the second part: The color of grass is green; the color of snow is. . ."

Begin by giving as much prompting as necessary for your child to see the answer—even giving the answer. Once a pattern is established, the child will begin to fill in the blanks more readily.

DESCRIPTIONS

14. "I'm Thinking Of. . . " This is a game that can be played anywhere. It's a common childhood game that is perfectly suited to helping hyperlexic children learn to understand and generate descriptions. Take turns describing and guessing. When it is your turn, describe concrete recognizable things your child is familiar with. When it is the child's turn, he or she may at first say a lot of unrelated words that do not really describe an object. This is all right, because a pattern is being established and later the child will use the pattern to give appropriate descriptions.

15. "What is It?" Posters. Cut out pictures of common household objects and paste them on separate pieces of paper. Below each picture, write a brief description of the item or its function: "A refrigerator keeps things cold." Attach these pages to the real items they represent and ask your child to read the descriptions. Leave them in place to look at several times during the course of the day. Alternatively, write descriptions on separate pages and ask the child to match them to the appropriate pictures.

PROBLEM SOLVING

16. "What Should We Do?" Use a minor or common problem as an example, such as milk spilled on the kitchen floor. If the child cannot offer solutions to the problem, make a list of several possible solutions and go through it one item at a time, such as "Lick up the spilled milk," "Borrow the neighbor's dog to lick it up," "Get a paper towel." Encourage your child to tell you whether a proposed solution would work. Laugh at the silly ones. Cross off the ones that won't work until you are left with the right solution. Later you can apply this technique to more complex problems, such as learning to share or playing cooperatively.

17. Stop the Story. Make a point to read with your child and interrupt the story. Even the simplest children's story will be based on a conflict or problem. Help your child identify the problem in the story and talk about what could be done to solve it. Then finish reading the story to see what happened.

EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

18. That's Crazy. If your child won't tell you what he or she did in school today, try saying something like, "I know! You stood on your head all afternoon."

This will usually get a reaction—and the information you asked for in the first place.

19. Tell Me More. Pretend that you don't understand what the child is asking for and challenge him or her to give specific instructions. If a child wants the puzzle on the top shelf of the closet, get up and walk the wrong direction. Interpret everything literally or say that you don't understand. If the child really wants that puzzle, he or she will persist with instructions until you get it down.

Verbal Processing

20. 1, 2, 3, Go. Make a game of challenging your child to follow more than one direction at a time. Tell him or her you are going to give two or three things to do. Say them or write them down. Ask the child to repeat or read them back to you. Then say "1, 2, 3, Go!" and let the child try to follow the instructions. Begin with two instructions and progress to three.

21. Good Listening. Assign a simple task that involves several descriptive words, such as "Please find the little striped ball." You may write the instructions at first, but taper off to giving them orally and ask the child to listen carefully before you give the instruction.

22. Where is It? Hide a favorite toy or small object in various places that require your child to use prepositions to find the toy—under the table, behind the chair, over the door, next to the desk, etc. Give verbal instructions along with visual cues as necessary. To start with, you might label the places where you might hide the toy, such as writing "under" on a piece of paper and actually placing it under the table.

23. Spelling Dictation. If your child asks you how to spell a word, you may only dictate one letter at a time and watch as he or she writes it down. Gradually try to increase to two or three letters at a time. If a child can remember and produce three letters at a time, this improves skills in following complex directions.

24. Cooking. Find a simple recipe and cook with your child. Ask the child to read the ingredients list and make sure you have everything. Then let him or her read the instructions and try to follow them in proper sequence. Ask questions like "What should we do now?" "How long should we cook this?" to encourage comprehension and interpretation of what is read.

In all these language-building activities, the child may need a specific model for the answer and may repeat this model word for word at first. Or the child may need open-ended sentences where you give part of the answer and let him or her fill in the rest. Eventually, once the pattern is established, the child will be able to do the activity independently. If the task is difficult for the child at any point, it is important to *write* the question *and* the answer. Be sure the child reads the question and the answer before continuing.

You may have other ideas to add to this list. The point of listing these activities is to demonstrate that the ordinary parent or caregiver can take an active role in teaching language to hyperlexic children. Of course these activities can be used at school by a teacher as well, and teachers may have other ideas to suggest. Look for everyday experiences and ordinary materials and help the child use language to describe these things. This lays a solid foundation for more abstract thinking later.

9

Your child's place in the family

"Mommy, I want you to play with me."

Dana, two-and-a-half and clinging to Ronda's leg, pleads for some attention from her mother. Across the kitchen, her five-year-old hyperlexic brother, Kirk, bellows for a chocolate candy bar at 9:00 on a Saturday morning, having refused to eat his bowl of now-soggy cereal.

What's a mother to do?

What is fair?

It will take time and determination to deal with the disruptive behavior and bring Kirk back to a peaceful relationship with the rest of the family. In fact, it could take all morning. Or all weekend. Should Ronda give Kirk the candy bar for breakfast just to get him to be quiet? If she does, she can give Dana the attention the little girl deserves.

Or should Ronda hold her ground and insist that Kirk must eat at least a few bites of something resembling nutrition before embarking on an all-day binge of sweets? If she chooses this course, Dana may finally decide that Mommy just doesn't like being with her and spend the morning sulking in front of cartoons.

Neither scenario is very appealing. In either case,

somebody loses.

Sometimes these episodes of unreasonable and unmanageable behavior last several weeks before a child accepts an appropriate standard of behavior. If it's not a candy bar, it will be something else that triggers an outburst. The temptation is always to do what will keep the peace—or at least keep the noise down to a level that does not threaten the entire family with permanent hearing loss.

Even when Kirk is relatively peaceful, Ronda feels the pull between the dissimilar needs of her two children. Ideally, she would like to spend more time one-on-one with Kirk, to help him improve his language, encourage his efforts to grasp difficult concepts, show him how to conquer the motor skills that elude him, and positively reinforce good behavior. But this might mean sternly telling a normal, active two-year-old to stay out of the way. Ronda would also love to spend more time having leisurely tea parties with Dana—but that's difficult to do when Kirk tends to come into the room and throw the plastic dishes around, instantly upsetting his sister and firing up everyone's tempers.

Parenting a special-needs child takes a lot of time and energy. The plain fact is that what you do may not always be fair to other children in the family. For instance, if two kids are fighting over the same toy, you may find yourself urging the non-hyperlexic child to surrender well-founded rights to the toy, simply because it is easier to reason with or distract that child. Catching yourself before falling into this trap takes a special level of alertness and a great deal of resolve. You must be ready to deal with the consequences of an amazingly tenacious hyperlexic child not getting what he or she wants.

BENDING THE RULES

"When you have another child," says one mother, "parenting styles are really different." Onlookers will

suggest that *all* parents have to do things differently for different kids. But this parent insists, "It's hard for other people to see that this is *really* different."

Adam is a middle child, and his mother, Marcy, admits that even though all three children are expected to follow the house rules, there are two areas where Adam gets special consideration. If Adam has had a rough day and it is clear that he has exhausted all of his powers of concentration, he is allowed to choose his own meals while his brother and sister must eat what Marcy prepares. Also, when sibling disputes arise, Marcy steps in more quickly if Adam is involved, to show him how to diffuse the situation. The other two children sort out their differences with minimal intervention.

Séamus's parents contend that the rules are pretty much the same for him as they are for his older brother and sister. They take pains to make their expectations crystal clear to Séamus and use appropriate methods to get him to comply.

As one parent observes, "Since the purpose of discipline is to teach the child self-discipline, each child is taught differently. Expectations must be based on the child's understanding: You can't expect a child to *behave* when he asks you how to *be 'have.'*"

If you have a younger child who is not hyperlexic, remember that he or she watches how you relate to the hyperlexic sibling. Dana is certainly not going to sit placidly in her chair and explain to herself that, "Kirk has special needs so Mommy has special rules for him; but I know better so I won't ask for a candy bar for breakfast." Younger children imitate older children, hyperlexic or not.

You may want to nip undesirable behavior in the bud if it starts showing up in the imitative non-hyperlexic child. Being fair does not mean letting every child push you to exactly the same limits. It will be in everyone's best interests not to fall into that pattern.

If your non-hyperlexic child is older than the hyperlexic, you may be able to explain the needs of the younger child and why it is important for you to do a particular thing at a particular time. Brian's older brother understands the simple explanation that Brian learns differently than most children and that his parents had to search for the correct way to teach him. Adam's brother and sister accept the exceptions Marcy makes for Adam. After all, siblings live with the hyperlexic child, too, so they know when the buttons will be pushed as well as parents do.

It is not easy—and not always possible—to do what's best for everyone. But this is certainly a target to aim for.

HEY! HOW DOES HE DO THAT?

Five-year-old Andrea was not happy when three-year-old Joey started reading. As the oldest of three children, Andrea was working hard in her kindergarten class on basic phonics, learning to read the regular way. But Joey just started calling out words as he saw them. It made his sister crazy.

Even if there is not a problem because of a younger child reading before an older one, siblings will have their difficulties. Brian's big brother was very proud when Brian learned to read; he even took full credit for teaching him. Still, the boys are almost constantly arguing because of missed communication. Many nuances of language are totally lost on Brian, and his older brother gets annoyed because Brian does not understand everything he says.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

There may be times when it seems that having a hyperlexic child would be easier if there were only one child in the family. Then parents would be free to focus attention in that one direction. They could be vigilant about spotting special needs and energetic in

meeting them.

Nevertheless, there are great advantages in having other children around, either siblings or other playmates. Caleb was not quite two-and-a-half when his sister came into the world and invaded his territory. An unidentified hyperlexic, Caleb was already reading several dozen words and was generally uninterested in whatever was squawking in that wicker cradle by the window. However, his sister was interested in Caleb. As she matured, her eyes settled on him. She watched him; she laughed at him; she chased him around in her walker.

Caleb had a problem now: as much as he might like to ignore his sister, she had other ideas. She refused to leave him alone. When Caleb was diagnosed as hyperlexic, Cana was about a year old—just the right age to be a real nuisance to her big brother. Their parents chose to let her bother him. If he was obsessed with watching "Wheel of Fortune" and she stood in front of the television, he was forced to acknowledge her existence. If he was content to turn his trike upside down and spin the wheel and she giggled and tackled him from behind, he had to relate to her.

Joey's mother provides day care for other children. Consequently, Joey has always been surrounded by a houseful of children without the privilege of isolating himself. His mother, Lynn, is convinced that this environment has had a positive impact on Joey's social development.

Two major benefits come from interaction with other children: language stimulation and interaction skills. The child with normal language abilities provides a constant babbling model for the hyperlexic child. Although two different learning patterns are at work, the hyperlexic child sees brothers and sisters or playmates using language in functional ways. Even if they are screaming at the tops of their lungs about

something that makes them mad, at least they are using language. Hopefully, most examples will be much more positive than "how to have an effective temper fit," a skill at which the hyperlexic child is already adept. When other children are around, the hyperlexic child sees the practical use of language as a means of communication. There will be plenty of opportunities for adults to urge all the children to "use their words" to ask for a toy or express their feelings.

Unless her physical safety was endangered, Cana's parents let her go at Caleb as much as she wanted. Obviously she adored her older brother and wanted to be with him. Even though her attempts to break into his lonely world annoyed Caleb, her persistence made them effective. This little redheaded problem simply was not going to go away; he was going to have to deal with her. In the beginning, there were some high-pitched altercations. It wasn't long, however, before Caleb discovered that chasing through the house with another kid was actually a lot of fun. Tickling and wrestling were fun. Jumping off the furniture (over Mommy's protests) was fun. All through Caleb's first year of developmental preschool his teacher reported that, although he enjoyed school, he rarely played with another child. But clearly he loved to play with Cana at home. This was one of the first real interactive connections that Caleb made.

If you have more than one child, take advantage of this built-in resource. If not, look for other ways your child can be with other children. This can be anything from a structured play group to finding one best friend.

Even if other children do not understand the ins and outs of hyperlexia (and who does?), through daily experience they come to know what to expect out of this particular sibling or friend, and they find ways to relate. There are bumps along the way, but generally the immediate family and good friends find an equilib-

rium. Having a hyperlexic member does not change the fact that they are, after all, a family.

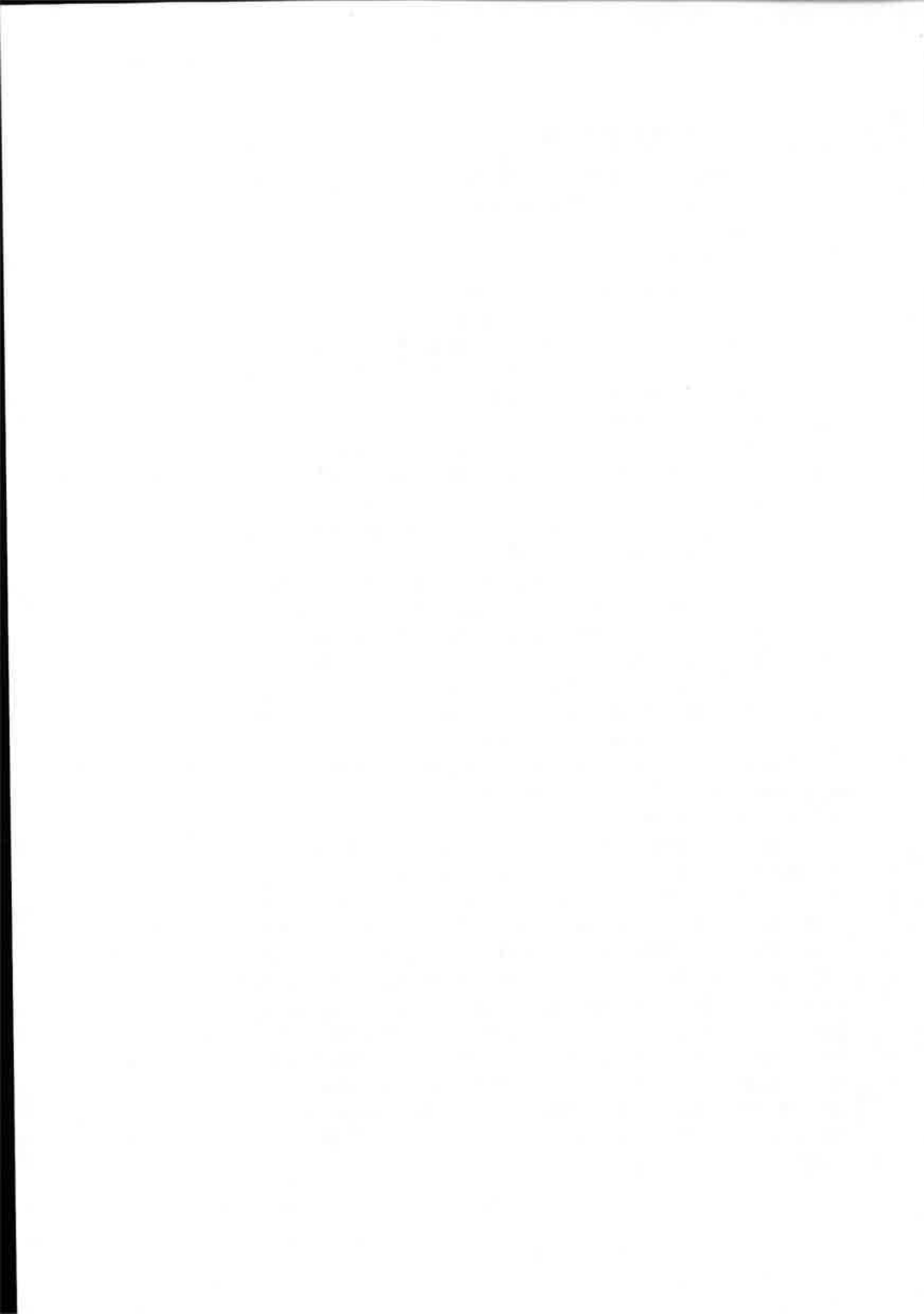
THE EXTENDED FAMILY

Whenever families get together, there is always the possibility of a collision about appropriate behavior or styles of discipline. Two sisters may have different approaches to raising their own children. Throw into the equation a child with unique needs, and it can really get complicated.

Tommy's grandmother saw him frequently and understood that certain less-than-desirable behaviors rose out of his hyperlexia. Encouraged by the progress she could see in his language, she generally tried to go with the flow when it came to his behavior. And Tommy loved his grandmother. At an extended family gathering at which Tommy was already overstimulated, he zoomed loudly through the living room, taking a swing at his grandmother as he flew by. She knew he was simply expressing his affection in a strange way and braced herself for his next move, which she knew would be a laugh and a vigorous hug.

But Tommy's uncle did not understand. He turned to Tommy's mother and said sternly, "That kind of behavior would never be permitted at my house."

Like other people who do not see your child on a regular basis, relatives may have their own opinions about your abilities as a parent. You can be defensive and react with, "You don't have the first idea about what my life is like." You can decide to just say nothing. Or you can say, "Let me explain to you why Tommy did that." Which tactic you choose depends on your own temperament and your relationship with your extended family. However, it is worth remembering that this is your child's family, too. They may not always understand, but they probably love your son or daughter as a member of the family. And a little education can go a long way.



10

Your child and the world out there

"Enjoy today's special double bacon cheeseburger with bacon and lettuce and tomato only 99 cents. Enjoy today's special double bacon cheeseburger with bacon and lettuce and tomato only 99 cents. Enjoy today's special . . ."

Red lighted words moved across the display window and three-year-old Caleb could not help but read them, over and over and over again, while his parents ordered lunch at the fast-food restaurant. When the food came, his mother intentionally selected a table out of view of the moving sign. Caleb just as intentionally stood up in his seat so he could see the sign and resumed reading in full voice. People were staring.

When four-year-old Kirk's mother went to pick him up from the church nursery—usually a happy setting for him—she found a very distressed little boy. The attendant explained that Kirk and another child had started hitting each other, so he had separated them and given them both a "time out." After a few minutes, the attendant invited the children back to the play area. Things were happening too abruptly, and Kirk didn't have a clue what was going on. He went to pieces and no one in the nursery could calm him down.

WHOM DO YOU TELL?

You can't keep your child cloistered forever. Sooner or later he or she has to face the public. And you have to face the public with this child who is far from typical.

Obviously teachers need to understand your child, but what about T-ball coaches? Babysitters? Neighbors? Relatives? Nursery attendants? Strangers who comment on reading skills? When is it appropriate to explain the differences in your child? When is it better to simply let people think whatever they are going to think and go your own way?

Ideally, the whole world should understand hyperlexia—right? That is not going to happen. Even when you do offer a brief explanation of the term—or even if you don't use the term but simply talk about how your child learns—not everyone will understand. "But he's so smart," people will say. "How can he have a language problem if he's reading?"

Sometimes you may find yourself referring to the learning difference and someone will say, "I never noticed anything. He seems normal to me." The fact is, the hyperlexic child looks normal, and the activity level may seem normal. Chances are that people who see your child only a few minutes at a time truly will not notice anything. If their attempts at engaging the child in conversation are resisted, adults may smile and conclude, "He's interested in other things right now."

Martha, mother of ten-year-old Patrick, says, "What's so insidious about hyperlexia is that it is invisible. He's handsome, bright, articulate. People don't understand that if he appears on target, he's working three times as hard as other kids to achieve that."

If people do notice something different about the hyperlexic child, they still may not understand the challenges that child faces. A neighbor told one mother, "Your problem is that you should let him run free

around the neighborhood."

That neighbor is never going to understand hyperlexia. She has already made up her mind about the answer without any understanding of the problem. But sometimes people do want to understand, or it may be in the children's best interest for people who see them a lot to have basic information about hyperlexia, even if they don't know the term.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Janet begins the explanation by focusing on the positive. "Matthew has an interesting way of learning." She starts with his remarkable reading—which people are likely to notice anyway—and slides gradually into the down side of a communication disorder.

Mark tells people that his son's differences are a communication disorder that is neurologically based, akin to autism but not as severe. Actually, this is an explanation parents give quite often.

Unless a person will have extended contact with her son Steven, Shirley simply says that he has a language problem and leaves it at that. She sometimes adds that it is difficult for him to play with other children because he cannot keep up with their language.

Susan is very open about explaining hyperlexia to interested listeners. She shares Martha's opinion that "It's only fair to him for people to know he's working with a disability. Then they're not so judgmental."

Martha's bottom line is that if explaining hyperlexia will improve a particular situation for her son, then she will do it. She doesn't broadcast it in front of him; she's discreet about it, but she believes that generally it is to his advantage for people to know.

At age six, Adam asked his mother, "Why do noises bother me and not you?" and "Why do I go to speech class and Kelly doesn't?" Marcy then explained that he has hyperlexia, which is a language disorder, and that he is more sensitive to noises and smells and

touch than others. She added that he did not cause it to happen, just as he did not cause himself to have allergies. Adam now talks about his differences and it has become easier to extract information from him about his feelings and thoughts.

PRESSURE IN PUBLIC

Apart from explaining hyperlexia to people, other hurdles exist when facing the public with a child who is different.

Susan was seven months pregnant with her second child when Caleb, who had recently turned two, threw a temper tantrum in a parking lot. He flattened himself against the pavement, screaming hysterically, and adamantly refused to give up. Crouching down, because she could no longer bend in the middle, Susan literally had to drag her son to the relative safety of the car. She regretted ever attempting the quick shopping trip—and it was a very long time before she went out alone with Caleb again.

More than one hyperlexic child has been asked to leave a preschool because the system was simply not set up to deal with children who did not fit the mold.

Janet found her life transformed by a son with special needs. Her son literally could not be left with babysitters; her instincts told her that her child needed to feel safe. While he was very young, he was not able to deal with the world apart from having a parent nearby. When he was older and his language improved, the problems subsided, as is true for many hyperlexic children. But during those early years, parents may experience demands that parents of "normal" children cannot fathom.

Connor's parents chose to avoid large gatherings completely, even family get-togethers. His behavior seemed exacerbated by the noise and commotion at such events. This was "not only for his sake, but also for ours," his father says. "The staring and the 'advice'

get to be a little much."

Martha had expected to return to her career after a few years at home with Patrick. But when she realized she had a child whose needs were special, she put that aside. Ten years later, she is still an at-home mom.

When told that a hyperlexic child learns differently, some well-meaning parent will say, "But every child is different." True enough. The parents of the hyperlexic child shake their heads and say, "No, I'm serious. This is *really* different." But the message does not always get through.

Marcy once told a neighbor that Adam was hyperlexic. The neighbor said, "Oh, yes, my kid is hyperactive too," and launched into a discourse of the activities of her child.

When Kris's son Anthony demonstrates behavior in public that makes other parents stare, she wants "to tell them to go stuff a sock. Give the kid a break. We all do weird stuff; we just don't admit it."

Many parents of hyperlexic children intuitively know that their kids need a whole different approach to parenting, including language, discipline and learning to be with other people. Again acting on intuition, some have resisted the attempts of teachers or psychologists to put labels on their children that they just did not feel right about. Parenting books and magazines are little help; parents are on their own to figure out what is best for their children.

Intuition has proven a powerful tool. "Sometimes you just have to go with your gut," Martha says. "An inner voice warns you. Always go with the gut feeling."

Martha puts this into practice by evaluating every situation according to how stressful it is for Patrick or for her as his mother. Any situation that is even moderately stressful for Patrick or her is eliminated. "I know I've hurt some people," she admits, "but some friendships were just too difficult to deal with."

She tells of a time when she and Patrick visited a friend and her daughter. Playing with the other child proved to be stressful for Patrick; the other child got upset with Patrick; the friend got upset with Martha and Patrick. Martha was in the middle of it all, wanting to do what she knew was best for her son while fending off other demands for her emotional attention. In the end, she decided it was not worth it. "Just beause you're friends with the parents doesn't mean the kids will interact well. Is the relationship worth the stress?" she asks. "The top priority is the people in this house and keeping everyone on an even keel."

In many ways, parents of hyperlexic children take on the role of being a buffer between their children and the world. The child who has mastered the orderly system in the home now needs help with the disorder outside the home. That means making unexpected choices.

Eventually the hyperlexic child will be able to face the world; he or she just needs some extra help along the way.

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Stand up for your child

Kimberli had just turned two and was part of a park district class for two-year-olds. Not yet identified as having hyperlexic characteristics, she tended toward the difficult behavior that is common in many hyperlexic children. But two-year-olds are two-year-olds, regardless of their level of language. The teacher was very demanding, expecting these tykes to sit still for lengthy stories and complete art projects that Kimberli's mother thought were too complex for that age group. The stress overwhelmed Kimberli, and because of a tantrum on the first day, the teacher wanted Kimberli and her mother to leave the class and not return.

Kimberli's mother stuck it out. Despite continued rudeness from the teacher, she believed her daughter could benefit from the class and had every right to participate in a park district program.

When asked, "Why is it important to be an advocate for your hyperlexic child's needs?" one father responded simply, "Who else is going to do it?"

You may have an extended family that adores your child, and they try their best to understand hyperlexia. You may have a great relationship with and utmost confidence in your child's teacher. Your child may love

going to language therapy sessions. With so many people who want to help your child, why should you think of yourself as an advocate?

To all those other people, as well-intentioned and effective as they are, your child is one of many children who will pass through their lives, maybe only for a year at a time. They represent help, yes, but you are the constant factor in your child's life. You are the one who lives with that child day by day. You know your son's moods. You know what events will push your daughter's difficult-behavior button. Ultimately you are the one who knows your child better than anyone else in the world.

On some days you may feel overwhelmed and ineffective—doing things that you know are mistakes the instant you do them. But not all days are like that; hopefully most days are not like that. The professionals have a strategic role in development, but a caring, committed parent is a child's greatest need and best resource.

Why should you advocate for your child? Who else will?

THE ADVOCATE'S ROLE

A dictionary definition of the word *advocate* might say something like "to defend or plead the cause of." The legal overtones are clear. But life is not a court with specified rules and procedures and a judge to determine whether you have argued well enough.

Life is a series of ordinary circumstances, activities and events—all settings to which you want your child to adjust happily. Playing in the T-ball league, interacting on the merry-go-round, sitting still through a holiday dinner, being quiet in church, listening to the teacher at school are all situations where your child might need an advocate.

Advocating does not always mean presenting a formal argument. It may simply mean intervening on the

playground when the older kids upset your daughter and she lacks the language skills to communicate with them. It may mean believing that your son has a right to play on the T-ball team, despite the extra work for the coach. It may simply mean being physically present with your child in those circumstances where he or she is likely to have difficulty coping or keeping up with what is going on.

It is the advocate's role to anticipate when help will be needed, and to be there to give the help. You plead your child's cause with your very presence in circumstances where it would be easier for you to be somewhere else. If you decide to be your child's advocate, you might choose to forego the drop-off play group in favor of the parent-child play group. Then be prepared to help your child through the experience.

Kimberli's mother learned early to prepare as much as possible in advance. "Preventive, nonjudgmental, constructive planning can go a long way," she says. "If you can do that, you may avoid much of the troubleshooting that inevitably comes later." This means preparing the child for transitions and new situations, as well as carefully selecting teachers and classrooms or social settings.

A more formal approach is sometimes necessary, such as with individual teachers or the larger school system. If your child is in a special education placement, you have certain courses of action available to you when you think things are not going well. Following through on these options is a form of advocating for your child—of looking out for his or her best interests.

Tips for the advocate

Whether it's an informal situation or a problem with the school district, keep in mind some basic principles as you stick up for your child.

Be calm. No matter how irritated you may be, losing your cool takes the focus off of your child's needs and puts it on your temperament. Suddenly everyone will be interested in getting you to calm down—or the disagreement may even turn into a match of wills that has little to do with your child. You can be calm and firm at the same time.

Be friendly. This goes hand in hand with being calm. Go out of your way to greet your child's teacher. Help in the classroom. Establish an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual effort. In this context, when you feel the need to say something of an advocacy nature, you can be taken seriously without putting anyone on the defensive.

Be organized. Look ahead for signs of trouble. Keep a mental checklist of the circumstances and people your child will face in a given day. Are there any red flags? Is the field trip next Tuesday likely to cause behavior problems? What can you do, in advance, to offset them?

Be informed. Hyperlexia is not exactly a household word. In many areas, it is not even known in the school system. Don't wait for information to come to you. Look for publications, conferences or individuals that can help you understand hyperlexia.

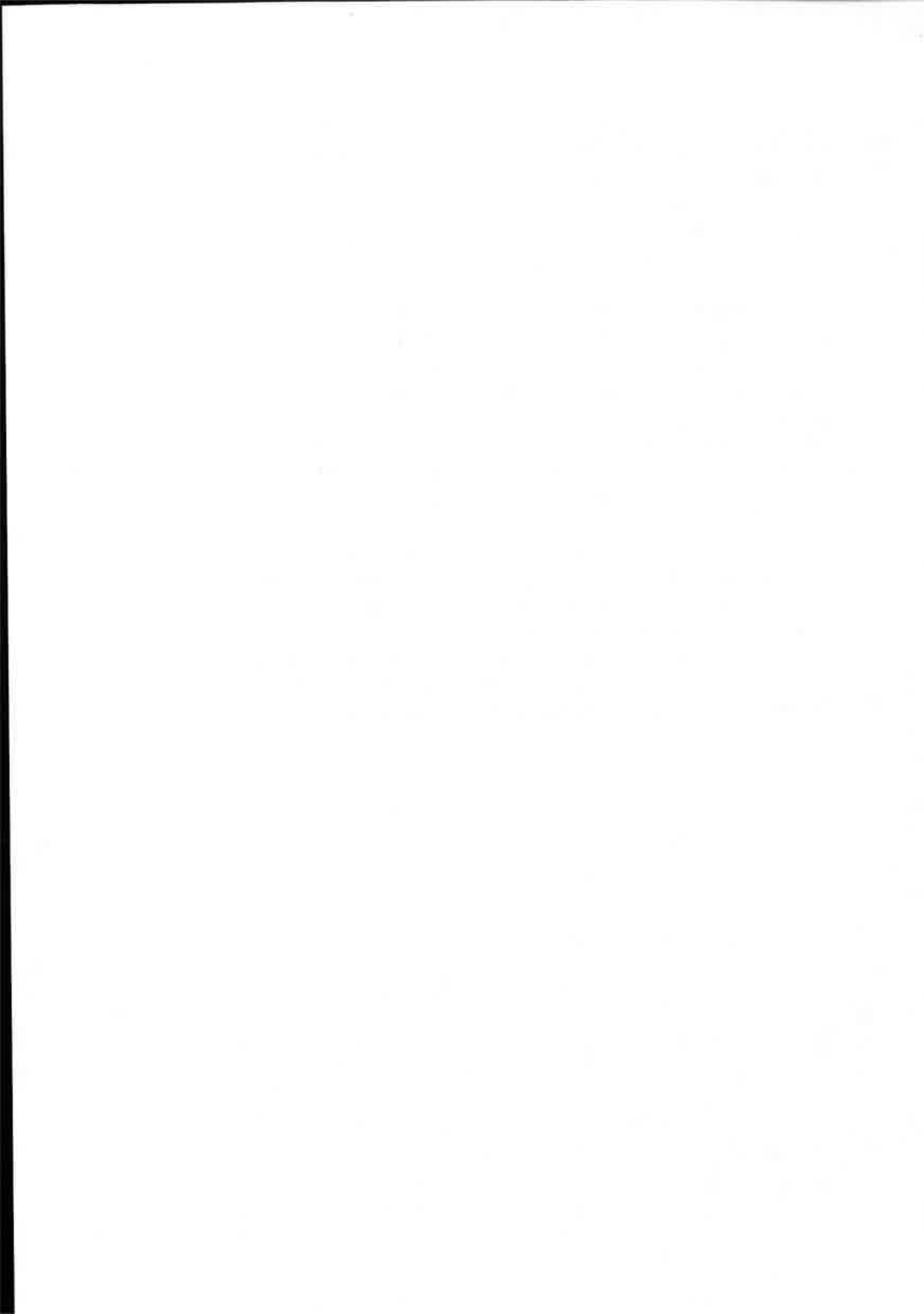
Be equipped. Once you are informed, be equipped to inform others. If you have found a written resource that you think is helpful, get extra copies. Give them out freely to people who are interested—or to people you think need to know the information. Most likely, you will be the primary resource for information about hyperlexia for anyone who is dealing with your child, from a babysitter to a school psychologist. Putting the responsibility on professionals to do their own

research—on a subject they know nothing about—without any help from you is not in your child's best interest. It is important that you are comfortable and knowledgeable when talking about hyperlexia.

Be discerning. There may be times when no matter how calm, friendly, organized, informed and equipped you are, you run into a person who simply refuses to try to understand. Pick your battles. Most of the time the stakes are small. Save your advocating energy for the times that matter most. Not everyone has to understand, as long as you are standing guard to decide who really needs to understand.

Advocating is not a special role; it is a parent's role. All children need someone to look out for them. Because you have a child with special needs, you may have to be a bit more strategic about the task.

Not only do you know your own child better than anyone else, you care more than anyone else. That's the best reason in the world to be an advocate.



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Make the most of special education

If a child with the characteristics of hyperlexia is identified properly at a preschool age, some of the language difficulties and social problems can be addressed so that the child gets off to a strong start in school. Even without being identified as hyperlexic, most children with these symptoms qualify for special programs in the school district because of obvious language difficulties or behavior problems. With or without an early identification, what the school offers the child is important. If parents understand the goals of special education classes and the rights they and their children have, school can be an effective way of attacking problem areas.

Special education is not a panacea. The hyperlexic's learning style will not suddenly become "normal" because of early intervention or terrific teachers. But a great deal can be accomplished in the child's favor when parents and teachers work together.

Free appropriate education

President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-142 on November 29, 1975. This federal law made it mandatory for school districts to offer free, appropriate education for students between the ages of three

and 21. This law came about because parents and professionals were unhappy with certain conditions and brought their concerns to the attention of Congress. Millions of children, whose learning handicaps were undetected by their schools, were not learning as much as could be expected in the regular classrooms. Even families of children whose disabilities had been identified were forced to find services outside the public schools. Lawmakers believed that special education could make a difference in whether these children achieved their potential. States that do not comply with the procedures spelled out in PL94-142 cannot receive federal funds for their schools.

On October 8, 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed Public Law 99-457, which applied specifically to preschool children. This law authorized federal funds to help states provide special education to children from birth to age five. Belief in the value of early intervention—even before age three—is what this law is based on. Children from birth to age two who are delayed in development or are considered to be at risk for substantial delay qualify for this program. Some programs for very young children actually are carried out in the child's home. Teachers or other professionals visit regularly to assist parents with developing skills in working with their children. In other programs, parents take their children to a place that offers appropriate services, such as a hospital, school or day-care center. Regardless of the approach, the goals are the same—improving language, motor skills, self-help activities, communication, creativity and cognitive skills.

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS

At the heart of PL94-142 is the individualized education program (IEP). This is a required, written document that describes these things:

- what level the child is functioning at now

- annual goals and short-term objectives
- what specific services will be provided
- when services will start and how long they will last
- evaluation procedures and criteria for monitoring progress

The IEP is a product of a thorough evaluation of each child. Information is gathered through formal testing or informally from parents and teachers. Based on these results, educators establish goals for each child. The law says that the goals must be stated in a measurable way and based on performance. In other words, they must be specific enough that progress can be seen in the child's performance.

IEPs are important because they recognize that every child in the special education program, whether in preschool or high school, should be treated individually, not simply lumped together with other children who seem to have similar problems. This element was included in the law because lawmakers and special educators were convinced that children would make better progress if their needs were considered on an individual basis.

Parental rights

Periodically during the special education process, parents meet with a team from the school district to discuss the IEP. This is sometimes called a "multidisciplinary conference" or "staffing" because all of the school's staff who will be involved in the child's program give input to the IEP. The child's teacher and the director of the program at the school will attend the IEP. Other professionals who may be present include the speech and language pathologist, a social worker, a psychologist, an occupational therapist, and anyone else who may be providing services to the child through the school district.

Parents may be surprised and intimidated by the number of professionals who attend these meetings. You do not have to go alone. You can ask a private therapist or a professional whom you trust to go with you. If you think you may not understand everything that is happening, you can tape-record the meeting and review the tape before agreeing to anything.

As a parent you have the right to see your child's records—and to understand them. If you see anything in the file that you do not understand, ask for clarification. If a report gets into the file and you think it is inaccurate or may negatively affect evaluations of your child in the future, you may have the file purged. The information in your child's file is confidential; it cannot be disclosed to anyone without your knowledge.

To comply with federal and state laws, your school district probably will have an elaborate set of forms and procedures for children involved in special education. These will include forms or letters to inform you of any evaluations or meetings about your child. You should always receive written notice at least 10 days before the school district makes any change in your child's placement or goals. The notice should explain what the meeting will be about or why a particular evaluation is necessary if it is outside the routine testing that is done to monitor progress.

If you do not agree with the proposed plan for your child or think that he or she has been placed in an inappropriate classroom, you do not have to sign the IEP. If you consent to the placement the school is suggesting and later change your mind, you may revoke your consent at any time. If you find yourself really locking horns with the school district over diagnosis or placement, you have a right known as "due process." This means you may follow a prescribed legal proceeding to obtain an impartial decision about what action is appropriate. You can bring the evaluation of an outside expert to that hearing if you wish.

Your school district should make sure you are aware of all your rights. The district normally provides you with a sheet summarizing parental rights and certain aspects of the law; most likely you will receive one of these every time you have a formal meeting with school staff. Make yourself familiar with what this sheet says. You may never have to be aggressive with your child's school; but then again, you may.

The IEP is a tool to help everyone do what is best for your child. Respect the experience and insight of professional educators, but at the same time, remember that you know your child better than they do. They may spout educational jargon rapidly as they push through the paperwork. Stay in your chair; do not let them rush you. Make sure you understand what they say about your child's achievement levels and the goals they propose.

The forms used for keeping track of goals will vary from school to school. But the law requires that goals be stated in measurable terms—in other words, how much is your child expected to achieve and in what period of time? The short-term objectives are the key parts of the goals. These are the specific things the teacher and therapists will be working on during the school day. Some sample short-term objectives might look like this:

> Caleb will follow a one-step auditory direction three out of five times weekly by October 30.
>
> David will share a toy with a peer three times a week by November 30.
>
> Jeffrey will put five pictures in sequential order 80 percent of the time by April 30.

Placement choices

Your school district may not quite know what to do with your hyperlexic child. Your child reads—and probably writes and spells—at a much higher level

than his peers, but the fact that he or she does not comprehend language at a normal level and does not socialize appropriately might make it difficult for the child to be placed in a regular classroom at a young age. Generally, school districts are set up to handle children with more common developmental difficulties, so the authorities may not know where the hyperlexic will best fit in. Even so, most hyperlexic children are placed successfully in regular classrooms before too long.

Every classroom teacher will need to make some adjustment to the curriculum for a hyperlexic child. Some are more willing than others to do this. Some guidelines to keep in mind when thinking about your child's placement include the class size, the strength of the language development program, disorders of other children in the class, and flexibility of the overall program.

Ideally, class size should be on the small side, but not too small. It is important for the hyperlexic child to be surrounded by enough peers to learn how to be part of a group and to observe the social interactions of other children. If the class is too large, your child may be overwhelmed and express this with difficult behavior. And in a large class, the teacher and aides may be less inclined to take the extra time needed to do what only your child needs—like writing things down.

The program should have strong expressive and receptive language development elements. Teachers and aides should be willing to utilize reading skills to improve comprehension and the way the child uses language. Be alert for signs that a teacher is finding creative ways to encourage children in the classroom to "use words" in a variety of settings.

If your child is in a special education classroom, then everyone else in the class is, too. This means every child in the room has a problem with language

or learning at some level. This is completely acceptable, of course; but make sure that the overall level of functioning is fairly high. Hyperlexic children need to be around other kids who are using language in appropriate ways; they need to see the way other kids play together and relate to each other. Sometimes this is accomplished by dual placement, where a program for children with special needs includes participating in a regular classroom for part of the day. Many districts are now including special needs chidren in regular education programs with support from special education staff and classroom assistants.

The most important thing is for the teacher to be flexible. Far too often, parents run up against a teacher who seems to have all the answers without hearing any of the questions. Try to establish an open, back-and-forth relationship, but if you find the teacher is not being flexible and looking out for your child's best interest, do not be afraid to insist on appropriate modifications to the curriculum.

The noncategorical early childhood program of the school district is generally a good place for young hyperlexic children, with the exception that it is rarely set up to use the reading skill to develop language. But this is not your only choice. You may have enrolled your child in a regular preschool before even knowing about his or her special needs. The right teacher and program combination might be good for the hyperlexic child, though many will have trouble with social play, sitting still to listen to stories and focusing on group instruction.

A Montessori school is another alternative. Some children do well here because the tasks are the type hyperlexic children like. The emphasis on reading, routine and rote learning is agreeable, as is the provision of many hands-on opportunities for learning. But because children work individually in a Montessori setting, there may not be enough opportunities for

developing good social skills.

When the hyperlexic child is old enough for kindergarten, a regular kindergarten class is probably the best placement, especially if the child has been in the early childhood program in the previous years. Supportive services should continue, and again the teacher must be willing to make adjustments, such as reinforcing verbal instructions with written ones. For some children, an extra year in the early childhood program or in a developmental preschool class may be helpful.

For the child who has had sufficient early intervention to develop language and behavior skills, the regular classroom is a good choice during the primary years. It is certainly not free of problems, and you will have to be more involved than other parents whose children are in the class. But if your child has been prepared, the experience can be quite successful.

Alternatively, communication disorder classrooms have a strong emphasis on language intervention. Children placed in these classes still will be part of regular education programs as much as possible.

Behavior disorder classrooms are sometimes suggested for hyperlexics because of their noncompliant behavior, but this is not generally an appropriate placement. Remember that the hyperlexic child's behavior problems are linked to language, which may not be adequately addressed in this setting.

Support services are often the key to success in the regular classroom. A child may receive services from a speech and language pathologist, a learning disabilities or resource teacher or a social worker. Conversations with these people may help the classroom teacher through difficult times.

No matter where your child is placed, within the public school district or in private settings, you should expect to be more involved than the average parent.

Education professionals know a lot about many learning disabilities; hyperlexia is not one of them—at least not yet. Be patient, but hold your ground. It's up to you to make the most of your child's special education experience.

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Parent-teacher communication

"Get your book bag, Jack. Let's not forget your notebook." Jack's mother tucks the usual daily note to her son's teacher into the green book bag and zips it shut.

It is a daily ritual. Jack's teacher regularly sends home reports on how his day went at school. If she has any questions about his behavior or whether he is understanding something, she does not hesitate to ask. Jack's mother promptly answers every question and adds information about how Jack is doing at home.

Adam's mother is fortunate enough to live yard-to-yard with the school. She helps out in her son's classroom, volunteers in the school library, and is frequently present in the school building, available for consultation if Adam's teacher needs it. She is committed to consistent and clear communication.

Of course, this is an exceptional situation. Some children take a long bus ride to get to school, especially at the preschool age where special education classes are not necessarily held in the neighborhood school. In other families, both parents work, or there may be smaller children still at home, so frequent presence in the classroom is not realistic. But these

restrictions do not make communication impossible; it just has to be more intentional.

The basic premise of communication is that a sender transmits a message and a receiver understands the information. Parent-teacher communication can break down at various points: the parent may intend to write a note in the morning, but the baby spits up breakfast and won't stop crying; the teacher may forget to open the notebook to see if there is a message; the teacher might misinterpret the message for some reason; or the teacher simply might not be interested in the parent's perspective.

THERE'S BAD NEWS

Katie's preschool years were an unhappy experience. Katie had not yet been identified as hyperlexic, so her mother did not have a good grip on what she was really dealing with. The teacher made up her mind early on that Katie's problems were entirely behavioral and could be traced, at least in part, to inconsistent discipline at home.

Further, the teacher took the attitude that the special education professionals knew what was best for Katie and it would be better if her mother did not try to tell them what to do. Katie's mother may have sent a message loud and clear, but the teacher was not interested in hearing what she had to say.

Concerned that a particular standard preschool activity should be adapted slightly for her son, Caleb's mother wrote an explanatory note to his teacher expressing her concern and suggesting a modification in the way a particular language exercise was presented. Three days later the teacher sent back a note defending the original exercise. The entire page and a half sounded like educational theory that had been copied out of a textbook. No bending; no adapting; apparently there was only one way to do things, and the teacher was in charge. After all, she was the edu-

cational professional (who had never taught a hyperlexic student before).

Kimberli's mother has gone out of her way to meet with people in the school system about her daughter's needs. But she gets frustrated. She says, "It seems like I am constantly explaining my child to people who didn't listen the first time."

More than a few parents of hyperlexic children have been similarly frustrated, believing that school officials have certain pigeonholes to put children in, and they don't seem to hear parents who believe their child will not fit any of the available holes. "Special ed people seem to understand mental retardation, and that is all they know," says one exasperated parent. "Excuse me, but my child doesn't fit your pigeonhole."

And there's good news

This is certainly not a universal experience. The picture is not so bleak that absolutely every teacher keeps his or her eyes closed and refuses to make exceptions to the rules. Plenty of families have had happy experiences with school districts where professionals have admitted that they know nothing about hyperlexia and welcomed input from parents. (And whether or not the teacher welcomes it, parents interested in standing up for their children will give it!)

Séamus's parents obtain copies of an article explaining hyperlexia (written by his speech and language pathologist) and give it to absolutely every person in the school who may have contact with their son: teachers, principals, cafeteria workers, janitors, secretaries, bus drivers. Do they all read the article? Séamus's dad says, "If they don't at first, they do after they see me again." Without being obnoxious, he is assertive about their responsibility to Séamus's school experience to be as positive as possible.

For one family facing a move, the decision on where to buy a house was based on finding the best

possible school for Bob, a hyperlexic first grader. Several advance phone calls narrowed the choices down to three school districts. Bob's father then took a day off of work and made appointments to talk with the principal and a teacher from each district. One principal was "too busy" to keep the appointment, so they immediately crossed that district off the list. Their exploration of the two remaining choices led them to a teacher who was excited to have Bob in her class. "It was the best decision we ever made," Bob's father says.

Brian's mother was equally aggressive about communicating with her son's teachers. After two years in early special education programs, Brian was ready for regular kindergarten. In the spring before he was due to enter kindergarten, LeAnn, his mother, requested a meeting with the principal and kindergarten teacher. Armed with medical information, educational assessments and teaching strategies, she went to the meeting at the local elementary school. For two hours she shared what she knew about Brian and hyperlexia. She poured out her hopes that her little boy could go to his neighborhood school and learn as much from other kids as he would from the teacher.

At the end of the meeting, the wonderful, 30-year veteran kindergarten teacher gathered up all the papers, looked at LeAnn and said, "We would love to have Brian at our school. Go home and stop worrying." The rest is history. Brian spends all day in a regular classroom and, with the help of an aide, keeps up with the work.

Katie, whose preschool teacher never really understood her, still does not like school. But her mother is having a more positive experience with the school district. "Regular classroom teachers see Katie more as a challenge than just a child with problems that need to be 'fixed,'" she said. "Perhaps because they do not have years of special training, regular teachers have

been more open-minded and inclined to come to me when problems arise."

Some teachers really go the extra mile. Adam's third-grade teacher actually calls him on the phone the evening before a day she plans to be out of the classroom to prepare him for the change. It makes a world of difference in his ability to cope with the change in routine the next morning.

BREAKING THROUGH

Parents offer these suggestions for dealing with school districts.

Be friendly. Don't put the teacher on the defense. Find ways to nurture the concept that you are working together for the welfare of your child.

Be prepared. Prepare in advance for everything possible, such as distributing copies of reports or information about hyperlexia.

Be available. Make sure your child's teacher knows you are interested and responsive. Volunteer in the classroom and let teachers know you appreciate their help. Answer questions promptly, and ask them frequently. Brian's mother says, "Anything in his notebook that I don't understand (or agree with) is followed up by a visit."

Be consistent. Communicate frequently. Use the notebook in the book bag strategy, which is common in many schools, visit the classroom several times during the year, schedule extra conferences with the teacher, talk on the phone—whatever is necessary to keep the lines of communication open.

Be direct. Deal directly with the teacher who sees your child every day. Don't assume that information

will filter down from the top of the system to the classroom where your child is assigned.

"Don't keep any secrets," one parent says about parent-teacher communication. "You can't work together if you don't all know where you are going. I need to know if my son 'fell apart' during music class, and the teacher will understand him better if she knows that he was up three times last night with nightmares."

Working together is essential. Your child gains nothing if your relationship with the school is one of wrestling for dominance. It's true enough that the special education system is full of bureacracy, and there are staff members who infrequently see your child yet must write evaluations. But the person in the system who matters the most is the teacher who sees your child every day; keep the communication lines with this person open.

Don't be naive and blindly hand your child over to the state's educational system. But remember, you are your child's advocate, not the teacher's adversary. Focus on what will be best for your child in the long run, not on proving who is right about every little thing.

With 15, 20 or even 30 kids in the classroom, your child's teacher might be most responsive to the students whose parents are concerned and involved. The squeaky wheel gets the oil. Be a nice wheel, but don't be afraid to squeak.

14

Jumping the behavior hurdles

Caleb was sprawled comfortably on his back on the landing at the top of the stairs, watching a favorite video for the umpteenth time. Susan, his mother, climbed the steps and said enthusiastically, "The timer went ding. It's time for bed."

Caleb answered, "But I want to watch a video."

Susan shook her head. "No, it's time for bed."

"But I want to watch a video. Say okay."

"No, Caleb, it's time for bed. Turn off the video."

"But I want to watch a video," Caleb insisted. "Say okay."

Trying to be agreeable, yet firm, Susan said, "Okay, you can watch a video—in the morning."

Caleb tilted his head to one side and put on his most encouraging face. "Well, Mommy, that's close, but let's try again."

Susan laughed, of course—but Caleb still had to shut off the video and go to bed. He was not quite convinced this was fair and continued to protest.

Occasional—or frequent—outbursts are bound to happen, and most of them will not be so amusing. There are ways to minimize the problems. Some basic principles apply to teaching a hyperlexic child to "play by the rules." Under the right circumstances, your

child can be quite agreeable.

Maximize routine. Children with the characteristics of hyperlexia feel most secure and behave most cooperatively when a routine is in place. The way you do something the first time may well turn into the way you have to do it every time, whether it's the route you take to the store or the sequence of bedtime activities.

At times a 40-inch-high child loudly insisting on sameness simply cannot be accommodated. However, much of the time it is possible to use routine as a method for teaching desirable behavior *and* keeping the peace in your household. If no routine exists for a particular segment of the child's day, consider establishing one. This allows you to set the standard for appropriate behavior and response and provide the structure that the child needs.

No complicated tools are required to honor routine and make the most of your child's inclination to have things the same. Here are some simple ideas.

1. Schedules. Make a list of the daily schedule you want the child to observe, such as:

7:30 Eat breakfast.
8:00 Get dressed.
8:30 Get on the bus and go to school.
12:00 Eat lunch.
1:00 Play with friends.
3:00 Watch "Sesame Street."
5:00 Eat supper.
6:00 Take a bath.
7:00 Read stories.
7:30 Go to sleep.

2. Calendars. Use a calendar to show weekly patterns, such as school days, library story hour, play group, T-ball games, etc.

3. Lists. Make a simple list of things to do. Include tasks you need to accomplish as well as items that acknowledge the routine the child expects to see. Visually show that the routine still exists, even though you are adding activities to it.

Avoid surprises. Of course it is important to teach flexibility. Not everyone your child ever meets will accommodate the need for sameness and predictability. Even your own household schedule, as dull and drab as it might seem, requires flexibility and variation from time to time. Your son is in the happy groove of going to school every day—then spring break hits. Your little girl is attached to the morning television schedule, but you are planning to spend a week at Grandma's in another state. Changes in routine or transitions between activities can be tough for anyone. But they are a fact of life, so it's important to help your child accept them.

1. Stand in your child's shoes. The key in these circumstances is to prepare as much as possible for any change, whether it is minor or major. Look at the circumstances from your child's perspective. What does he or she need to cope with the change? In some cases, it is simply a matter of presenting the information appropriately and in advance.

Séamus was very used to the classroom routine. His teacher made a practice of writing the day's schedule on the chalkboard for him. If an unusual activity was planned, such as a school assembly, she inserted that information into the day's schedule. On those days, Séamus knew from the start that something would be different, instead of abruptly finding out at 10:00 a.m. that he was expected to walk in a line to the auditorium.

2. Verbal cues. Another way to prepare for changes

is to tell the child what will happen *before* the change. Allow time for the current activity to be completed before moving on. For instance, even though bedtime comes every day, your child may react to the sudden announcement that it has arrived. So you could say, "When 'Wheel of Fortune' is over, then it will be time to get your pajamas on."

3. Use a timer or clock. Some hyperlexic children learn to tell time quite early. But even if this is not the case, they can read the numbers on a digital clock. So you can say, "At five-zero-zero (5:00) it will be time to put the toys away." When 5:00 arrives, ask the child to look at the clock and tell you what time it is. Or use a timer, such as on a microwave or a wind-up kitchen timer. Sometimes it helps if the child sets the timer. Ask the child to turn the dial to "10" and explain that when the timer goes ding, it will be time to eat lunch.

Be flexible. Within reasonable limitations, be willing to negotiate. Keep in mind the behavior or level of compliance you are aiming for and be willing to adjust the route that gets you there. Be a model of the flexibility you want your child to learn.

1. Offer choices. When you have reached a behavioral stalemate with your child, offer two choices which are equally acceptable to you. If your son does not want to get dressed for school, aim for the target of getting him dressed; negotiate about the clothes he wears. Ask him, "Do you want to wear the blue pants or the green pants?" If your daughter insists on watching television, offer two choices of programs which you do not object to. If your child refuses to get in the car when you need to get to an appointment, let him or her choose a new place in the car to sit.

This is not a foolproof system. Sooner or later your child may figure out that saying, "I don't choose any-

thing" is a way to persist in defiance. Even then, you can continue offering choices. "We must go to the doctor. Do you want me to choose a seat for you or do you want to choose a seat?" The threat that the parent would do the choosing sometimes brings the child to a point of being willing to make a choice he or she did not want to make a moment ago.

2. *Share control.* Don't let the negotiation process turn into a power struggle. While you are the parent and are looking out for the child's best interests, recognize that the child has a need for some sense of control. The level of cooperation will be much higher if you keep this principle in mind. For instance, if you are writing a list of things to do on a particular day, let your child choose something to add to the list. Then be sure to actually carry out the activity the child selects.

3. *Offer incentives.* Some would describe this as outright bribery, but it is generally effective with hyperlexic children—as with all others! Rewarding positive behavior gives the child a reason to comply; in turn, this establishes a pattern of compliance. As one mother says, "It's worth it to use bribery on the small things if it gets the biggies accomplished."

A variety of methods have worked:

- small toys or treats
- star charts or stickers, where each act of compliance is visually rewarded
- work-up-to-it rewards, where 10 stars can be cashed in for a small toy or treat, or 25 for a major item.

Plan ahead. Always, always build in extra time—to get dressed, to get out the door in the morning, to eat a whole meal. Being patient is easier said than done, but it is essential. Accept the fact that this par-

ticular child needs some extra time and attention. Your three-year-old daughter may feed herself, dress herself and be standing at the door with her coat zipped while your five-year-old hyperlexic son is still wandering around in his underwear, oblivious to the fact that the rest of the family is waiting for him to get dressed. Obviously you want to work at changing this; in the meantime, plan for it.

WHEN DISCIPLINE IS NEEDED

When Marcy was asked about effective discipline for her hyperlexic son, Adam, she laughed and said, "I've tried a lot of things. The least effective method is screaming. Unfortunately, it seems like that's the one I use the most." Parents have limits, too.

A hyperlexic child is still a child. There will be times when he or she has to learn things the hard way—by being disciplined. When all your buttons have been pushed, it is easy to lose your cool. But even then, do your best to stay focused on the purpose of discipline. Ultimately, you are trying to teach the skill of self-discipline so that your child can demonstrate appropriate behavior in any given situation. Chose a method of discipline that moves you and your child in the direction of that goal.

Different systems work best for different families. Trial and error is the starting place until you find what your child responds to most positively. Here are some methods that have worked in other families with hyperlexic children.

Time outs. This method is widely used in many home and school settings. Parents of hyperlexic children have had various degrees of success, but quite often it works. When the child is very young, around two or three, perhaps nothing will really work. Then at about age four, children begin to understand the concept of "time out." During his second year of develop-

mental preschool, Caleb often came home with tales of Joshua and how he was always goofing off and having time out. Until Caleb observed "time out" happening to another child, he never quite made the link between the unacceptable behavior and the chair in the corner.

Most often "time out" is seen by parents as a form of punishment. In these cases, make sure the reason for the "time out" is understood by the child. Some parents write down what the inappropriate behavior is and have the child read it. If the child's language has not developed to the point where he or she understands the *if/then* connection, "time out" may not be very effective as a punishment.

Kris, however, takes a different perspective. "Time out is not a punishment," she says, acknowledging that punishing bad behavior with a "time out" never worked with her son. "It's a time to regroup, to calm down." Using a "time out" this way, Kris does not have to rely on her son's understanding of consequences for his behavior; instead, "time outs" have become a chance to get a grip on things and for everyone to start over again.

Whether you view "time out" as punishment or simply a chance for your child (or you) to calm down, it is important to structure the time out. Sometimes you have to sit with your child during a "time out" and physically restrain him or her from getting up. If you are the only parent at home with other small children, this might not be practical. If you do try it, remember to be concrete and visual with your child. Use a three-minute egg timer that the child can watch. Use a wind-up timer and let the child watch the time click away. Rose warns Andrew by counting to three before imposing a "time out." Because Andrew is old enough to tell time, Rose can then say, "Sit in your room for as many minutes as you are old." Without some structure or visual aid, "time out" is not likely to work.

Charts. Star charts or sticker charts are useful for many things, and discipline is one of them. You can think of a star chart as a preventive measure. Explain the rules and remind your child of them—in writing, preferably. Then positively reward good behavior with a star or sticker. For some children, wanting to see another star or sticker up on the chart is enough motivation to comply with the rules you have made. For the parents, this means being on the alert for good behavior to reward.

Deprivation. This system is simple. Find out what your child is currently most attached to and threaten to take it away, whether it's a video, a book or a promised outing. The obsessive quality of hyperlexic children makes it easy to see what means the most to them at the time. Whatever is motivating them at a given moment or phase can be removed if behavior gets difficult.

Susan came home from work one day and found a 100-piece puzzle spread all over the living room, while Caleb lay on his back watching a favorite video. Calmly she instructed him to pick up the puzzle pieces. He said "No." She got out the kitchen timer and set it for 10 minutes, telling him that if he did not pick up the puzzle before the timer went ding, then she would shut the video off. He said "No." The timer went ding; Susan shut off the video. Caleb screamed. She told him that if he wanted to watch the video, all he had to do was pick up the puzzle pieces. He screamed some more. Finally she said, "All right, I'll pick up the pieces, but that means you can't watch television for the rest of the day." He howled angrily and dared her to carry through. She did, although it was a very noisy evening.

The next day when there was a mess to be picked up, Susan simply said, "Hmm, we have a problem here. Who do you think should pick up this mess?"

Caleb quickly jumped up and said, "I will!"

Séamus ignored his father's request to put his bicycle away at the end of the day. So Pat put the bike up on the rack in the garage and left it there for three days. Séamus never again refused to put his bike away.

Diary. When Séamus breaks the rules, he has to write about his transgression in a diary. On the left-hand page, his mother writes a sentence, such as "Séamus will not climb on the furniture." On the right-hand page, Séamus has to copy the sentence five times. Some kids might like to sit and copy words, but Séamus does not. After using this method for a while, even just the threat of having to write in the diary motivates Séamus to comply with the rule or improve his behavior.

Spanking. Most parents of hyperlexic children agree that spanking generally does not accomplish very much. In fact, sometimes it escalates the undesirable behavior to even less manageable proportions or at least raises the decibel level substantially. However, some parents have used it successfully in selected circumstances. For instance, if a child grasps the concept of *if/then*, has been warned, but persists in a behavior that is dangerous, a quick swat might communicate that you mean what you say about staying away from the stove or not running in the street. One mother incorporated spanking into the "choice" method at one phase of her son's development, saying "Do you want to obey or do you want to get spanked? You can choose." The obvious choice was always to obey, and the boy knew it. If you choose to try this, decide in advance under what circumstances you will spank, such as when the child is endangering himself or someone else and does not heed warnings.

Tone of voice. Depending on your child, tone of voice can work for you or against you. Kris says that if her son hears impatience in her voice, it sets him off and things get worse. Martha, on the other hand, says, "It doesn't hurt to let him see me get angry and yell and realize I have my limits. When I do blow up, he gets in line quick."

Another way to use your voice, however, is to develop a "catch phrase" that lets your child know he or she is reaching the limits. "Are you being a good listener?" is the phrase one family uses to encourage their hyperlexic son to follow through with what is being asked of him.

THE CHOICE THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

Discipline is a basic parenting issue. Every family has to face it. At some point you are likely to act before you think and regret your choice later. But even that experience will not be wasted if you learn something from it about how your child responds to discipline. Remember that you have to make the choices that are best for your child and that match the goal of motivating your child to be self-disciplined.

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Moving toward independence

The young social worker smacked her gum contentedly as she ran down the list of questions that had become routine to her. Could Kirk skip? Could he gallop? Could he button his own clothes? Zip his own jacket? Did he get dressed by himself? Take a bath on his own? Brush his teeth? Did he alternate feet going up and down the stairs? Would he give his name and age if asked? Did he play with other children? Did he ask for adult help when it was appropriate?

The questions were far from routine for Ronda. A lot of these things—and many more—Kirk could not do on his own. There were other things he could do but rarely paid attention long enough to accomplish.

The list went on and on. Even looking at it upside down, Ronda could see that there were divisions on the page according to age, but she could not quite tell where Kirk's skills were supposed to fall. However, the number of times she replied "no" certainly sent up some red flags.

The language deficits were obvious; that's why the school district had sent the social worker in the first place. Now Ronda had to face the fact that there were other deficits, too. Panic set in.

Children with hyperlexic characteristics make a lot

of cognitive and behavioral progress when their language develops and expands. But just as they need to be taught language in very specific ways, they need to learn other things the same way.

SELF-HELP SKILLS

"I will do it! I will do it!" It is widely understood among parents that if a child is going to "help" with something, the task will take three times as long to accomplish. But, of course, children learn a great deal from being allowed to "help" or do things on their own.

Hyperlexic children will insist on doing the things they are interested in, just as other children do. However, they may not always be interested in the basics, like getting dressed in the morning, or eating lunch sitting down in a chair, or learning to use the toilet. Sometimes it is a matter of not staying focused on a task long enough to get the job done. Other times the task may seem too big to the child, who can't quite figure out where to start. Parents of hyperlexic children have used various approaches to get their kids to do things for themselves.

Turn it into a game. Kris constantly looked for ways to turn things into a game for her son. When he did not respond to straightforward instructions, he would get caught up in the spirit of play and get the job done anyway. For instance, she used "Beat the Clock" to help Anthony learn to get dressed. In the beginning she would time each part of the process: putting on socks, pants, shirt, etc. Gradually he worked up to being timed for the whole process together.

Another game Kris played was to hide Anthony's clothes around his room. His task was to find the clothes in the correct order and put them on.

Anthony's teacher cooperated with the spirit of games by saying things like, "You have one minute to

get to your seat." Gradually the need for timing activities fell off, and now Anthony follows the commands.

Charts. The old star chart favorite raises its head again! The visual reinforcement for following instructions and accomplishing a self-help task works very well.

Break things into steps. No child thinks the way an adult does. Even children with normal development benefit from having tasks broken down into specifics. For many kids, "Clean your room" is too vague; "Hang up your clothes, put the toys in the toy box, put the books on the shelf" is more specific. Apply this principle to everything you are trying to teach a hyperlexic child, who will have difficulty breaking down even the simplest request into the necessary steps.

"Go take a bath" can be turned into, "Run some water in the tub, get the bath toys out, get the wash cloth, get the soap, wash your face, wash your tummy, wash your legs," etc."

"Get dressed" means "Put your socks and underwear on, then get your pants, get your shirt, find your shoes."

"Finish your supper" means "Eat all of your hamburger, finish your peas, drink the rest of your milk."

At first these lists will be too much if you give them all at once. Give the child one step at a time to accomplish. When he has his socks and underwear on, then ask him to get his pants out of the drawer. Work at establishing a pattern based on the steps, and the self-help skills will develop.

Create opportunities for success. If you decide to use a star chart, for example, don't set your child up for failure. Instead, create opportunities for small successes that can be rewarded. This in turn becomes the motivation for bigger successes. Start with a

small, simple self-help task that you know your child can accomplish, reward that and move on from there.

Practice, practice. Be patient with failures. It may take a year for your child to learn to zip a jacket, but keep giving the opportunity to try, and keep demonstrating the way the two parts have to go together. The way that anyone learns to do something well is by doing it again and again. Encourage your child to keep trying; say something like "You'll get it someday, I know you will."

TOILET TRAINING

"Matthew, do you have to go to the bathroom?" Janet asked.

"No."

"Then why do you have your legs crossed?"

"Because I want to make an *X*."

Toilet training is a basic self-help skill, but it's one of the tough ones. Children do not learn to use the toilet until they are truly ready, no matter what antics the parents go through to make it happen sooner. The reality is that most hyperlexic children master this skill noticeably later than most other children. It is not unusual for a hyperlexic child to be four-and-a-half or five before the job is really done. There are exceptions on either side, of course, but realizing that toilet training will happen later as a characteristic of hyperlexia might make it easier to accept the delay. Eventually your child will learn, but in the meantime there are bigger mountains to climb.

When it seems the time is right to tackle this goal, there are some gimmicks worth trying.

Charts. Again! Actually, lots of parents of normally-developing children use star charts for toilet training. If the child is ready, it works.

Surprises. Katie's mother and father wrapped up a basketful of small "prizes" from which Katie could choose after she successfully used the toilet. Katie's mother does not think the system would have worked if her daughter had not been physically ready, but because she was ready, toilet training was accomplished within one month with this method.

Rewards. Kimberli's mother let her plan her own rewards, things like coloring books or small toys. If a needed item, such as shoes, was on the list, then the reward came in getting special shoes, such as Beauty and the Beast shoes. Kimberli was motivated because she had chosen her own rewards.

Tickle method. Bob's mother discovered that he tended to wet his pants when he laughed really hard. So she started tickling him when he was on the toilet so he would recognize the sensation of needing to urinate. It worked!

Train in a day approach. This method worked at age four for one boy. For more information, see *Toilet Training in Less Than a Day* by Nathan H. Azrin and Richard N. Foxx (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

Wait it out. Pat and Beth decided to wait until their son was really ready and concentrate on other things in the meantime. When he was four, Séamus simply came downstairs one day and said he didn't want to have wet pants anymore. So his parents said, "Okay, this is what you need to do."

MAKING FRIENDS

Kirk watched as his neighbor Cassie played enthusiastically with her big blue ball. After a few minutes

he walked over to his mother, who was sitting with Cassie's mother, and said he wanted to play with the ball. "Use your words to ask Cassie," Ronda said. "I can't," said Kirk. "Yes, you can. Just say, 'Cassie, can I play, too?'"

Ronda held her breath as her small son turned and walked across the grass to try out his new social skill. Her shoulders sank when she heard Cassie say, "No" and saw Kirk turn around and look at her with an expression that said, "What did I do wrong?"

When they are very young, many hyperlexic children seem to hardly notice when other kids are around, preferring to be by themselves. When they are older and more aware of their surroundings, they may want to interact but not know how to go about it.

Making friends is risky, and it's hard to prepare your child for those times when another child does not honor your child's best efforts. But your child needs all the help you can give in developing appropriate social skills.

Encourage initiative. Show your child how to say, "Well, hello! How are you?" and to answer that question when someone else asks: "Fine, thank you." The phrases are easily memorized and open a lot of doors, with children and adults.

Hire a helper. Several parents have had successful experiences with hiring a college student to go to a school's playtime or come into their home with another child. The helper's job is to encourage other children to play with the hyperlexic child and then prompt the child appropriately with conversation or sharing imaginative play with the other children.

Invite a friend. Plan an outing, such as to a puppet show or the story hour at the library, and invite another child to come along with you. This is a way

that your child can get used to being with another child without feeling a lot of pressure for conversation. Start with the first step; later show ways to use words to play together.

Read about friends. Go to the library and find some stories about friendship. Listen as your child reads and talk about the story together.

Write a story. Storytelling is a language-building activity that can do double duty. Use Winnie-the-Pooh or Thomas the Tank Engine or whatever set of characters your child is interested in. Start the story with a friendship theme and let your child dictate the dialogue. When your child reads the words, he or she can see visually that words are effective in relationships.

Stay current. Not every passing fad is something parents can get enthusiastic about. But if your child at least has basic awareness of what's hot among the preschool or grade school set, this will give him or her something to use to enter into social interactions, instead of being left on the sidelines because of ignorance of current fads.

Involve siblings. Let your hyperlexic child practice social skills right at home. If you have other children, take advantage of that fact. In addition to the informal play that goes on, model appropriate interactions, such as sharing toys, using words to ask for things, joint imaginative play, observing the rules of structured board games. Use the times when you can be present with your children to equip them for the times when you can't be there. All of your children will learn something positive.

Find a best friend. Nicki and her family are close to another family with a child about the same age as

Kimberli. This provides a secure place to learn how to build a friendship. Hyperlexic children are not likely to grow up into social butterflies, but they can learn to develop relationships and get along. One friend who truly accepts your child is better than a roomful of kids who do not.

When children are young, parents can make the choice to limit their own activities to give attention to their children's needs. But children grow up. They can't stay tucked away from the world forever. The job of parents is to prepare them to face the world without a buffer—and then to take a deep breath as they watch that first independent flight.

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Words about the future

"I nearly lost my mind when he was little," Portia says of her son. But now she thinks her eleven-year-old is a great kid.

When Joey was 18 months old, he started banging his head to the point of bruising himself repeatedly. Through his toddler years, he could not be separated from his parents. In those days, not a day went by that his mother, Lynn, did not think about his problems, feeling useless as a mom because she did not know what to do for him. But now that Joey is a first grader, she says to herself about every two weeks, "Oh yeah, he's hyperlexic."

Martha uses the term *selective forgetting* about the years when her son was small. She remembers it was very bad, but she has let the past blur. As Patrick got older and his language improved, life was better for everyone. At 11, her son is an art prodigy with an obvious future in that field.

Will it always be this way? This question lingers on parents' minds. At one level, they may be asking, "Will my life always be this complicated? Will it always take so much energy to deal with these needs?" At another level, they also ask, "Will my child 'get better'? Will he or she be able to live as an independent adult?"

Many questions about the future of hyperlexic children are unanswered. No systematic study has tracked children with these qualities from their preschool years into adulthood, so there is no authoritative body of information to reveal what such a child will be like at 12 years of age, or 18, or 21.

More than one parent has said, "The word may be new, but the characteristics are not. There must be people out there who went through school like this. What became of them?"

No doubt some of these children were tagged as underachievers in school—because they could read but would not pay attention—and perpetually suffer the consequences. Others probably succeeded in putting their lives together because of a superior ability to compensate for their weaknesses. They are swimming upstream, but they are making progress.

JEFF

Wendy, whose son was 14 at the time she first read an article describing hyperlexia, immediately thought that the characteristics applied to Jeff, especially when he was younger. She had tried to address her son's special needs without the benefit of a word to describe them and without the help of a supportive school district. Jeff was not admitted to an early childhood program on the grounds that if he could read, he did not have a communication problem to qualify him for the program.

Wendy has no "proof" that Jeff was or is hyperlexic. Many of the distinguishing qualities have diminished as he as gotten older, and he is now a successful high-school student with a solid grade point average and a normal circle of friends and extracurricular activities.

"I spent a lot of nights crying and wondering," Wendy says. But she managed to live through the years of people telling her she was a poor mother.

Despite moments of near insanity, she hung in and now encourages other parents to do the same, because, "waiting at the end of the tunnel is a really great kid."

BRIAN

Libby is a speech and language therapist. When she heard a presentation on hyperlexia offered by her school district, she said to the speaker, "The child you have described sounds like a nightmare. I know—I raised one."

Libby did not have the word *hyperlexia* when Brian was small, but because she was a language therapist, she soon recognized the pieces that were missing from Brian's language. All through his school years, he had difficulty with social interactions and often lived a behavioral horror story. It wasn't until Brian was nearly finished with college that Libby put the pieces together and realized he was probably hyperlexic.

Brian was an early talker, but his language was poorly organized. He had lots to say but tended to start in the middle of a thought. He began to read at age two and had a photographic memory for what he read, but he couldn't pull out the theme of a first-grade book when he started school. Eventually Libby realized that a lot of Brian's problems had to do with the fact that his pragmatic language was very poor. She spent one whole summer reiterating the rules of using language in practical ways for basic communication with other people. After that they started working on the social problems.

Brian has lived in two cultures other than his own and is fluent in two foreign languages. He attended college a thousand miles away from home and held down a part-time job during those years. At first glance, it would seem he has done pretty well for himself. And he has—but not without problems. Brian still has a difficult time with personal relationships, often saying exactly the wrong thing without knowing

it or meaning to. Libby says, "The trait that really rang a bell was the egocentrism. He doesn't know how to stop and think about other people. He constantly makes enemies because of the stupidest things."

Even as a college student, Brian tended to be obsessive about certain things. Whatever project interested him most was what he spent his time on, regardless of responsibilities in other courses. For instance, he might take one novel and become obsessed writing a magnificent paper on it, seeming to care nothing for all the other work he should have been doing in addition to that one assignment.

Libby believes Brian has come as far as he has because he has learned good coping skills and is able to apply them when needed. As for his future, she says, "He's going to be okay if he can find his niche, some place where he'll be able to use the strategies he has developed. The things that were so detrimental in high school will work in his favor as an adult." Things will never come easy for Brian, and his parents recognize that. They know he will always have to plan strategies and take things a step at a time. But the fact that he has overcome some of these problems as a young child has made him a much stronger adult.

JONATHAN

Jonathan was clearly developmentally delayed. Fortunately, his parents noticed this at a very early age and attacked the problems head-on. Jonathan appeared to be autistic, but Joan and Tom refused to accept the view that he had to spend his life confined by those early limitations. Joan placed her little boy in an Easter Seals program for speech, physical and occupational therapy. Later, she made sure he learned to separate from her and went to a regular preschool in the mornings. In the afternoons, she held school for him in her basement, where she continued to work on the areas the professionals were working on. When

Jonathan got into the regular school system, she sat up late at night helping him with his homework, taking him through each lesson, each concept, until he was able to handle the work on his own during his third year of high school.

By age 18, Jonathan had reliably delivered daily newspapers for three years, played the violin for seven years and driven a car for two years with no mishaps. He worked in a local bank during the school day as part of a work/study program, bagged groceries at a local store on the weekends, and worked on an Eagle rank in the Boy Scouts. Clearly he has done well.

Will it always be like this? Jonathan's mother says, "Yes, of course we asked ourselves this question, back then. But we always had hope. Even though his development was delayed, he did eventually learn a given task. It just took longer. . . . If we think of Jon as an infinite set of points, we had to try to reach each one."

If Jon were to meet a group of students or young adults who did not know his background, they might pick up on certain things that are different about him. For instance, spontaneous conversations for any length of time are difficult. But Jon is very friendly, and this is one of his biggest assets. The differences are becoming more and more subtle.

Jonathan is still hyperlexic, but he is mature enough to understand what that means, so he uses the specific tools he has learned over the years to get past the glitches. He doesn't always get the "whole picture" when he is processing verbal information, but more and more he recognizes when something is not quite connecting. He has learned to say "Can you repeat that, please?" or "What does that mean?" to fill in the holes when he needs to. As he heads into college, Jon's future looks bright.

"It was apparent almost from the beginning that the degree to which we worked was directly propor-

tional to his success," Jon's mother says. "We had to change Jon. We hung in there because we could see progress. He never hit a plateau in his development.

"When he was in his third year of high school, after working with him in a math course called Finite Math, I came away knowing that he would be independent. We were going for the gold. That had always been the goal, but the realization of reaching it hadn't surfaced yet. I felt like if he could understand that course, then we were going to make it."

Of the three boys—Jeff, Brian and Jonathan—only Jonathan was identified by a professional as having hyperlexic characteristics, and that was not until he was about 12. When the boys were small, all of the parents treated the symptoms of hyperlexia without ever having heard the term and without knowing other children like theirs and other parents facing the same challenges.

News of hyperlexia is spreading. More children are emerging as fitting the shape of this syndrome at a younger age. Perhaps in the future it will be easier to sketch an accurate picture of what a child with hyperlexic qualities will be like as an adult.

For now, Jeff, Brian and Jonathan are evidence that parents have a distinctive and essential impact on the future of these special children. Believe in your child. Take the future one day at a time; take one task at a time.

Above all, like Joan and Jonathan, go for the gold.

Glossary

Abnormal prosody: speech that varies from the usual pattern of stress and intonation of phrases or sentences.

Annual goals: established at the start of the school year for a child enrolled in special education. Teaching strategies and activities are designed so the child can achieve the annual goals.

Annual review: yearly meeting with parents and staff to review a child's individualized education program goals and progress, and to set new goals and objectives for the coming year. Placement changes may be suggested at an annual review, or additional services may be recommended.

Antisocial behavior: behavior, such as aggression or withdrawal, that runs counter to normally accepted standards for interaction.

At risk: refers to young children (usually preschoolers age 3-5) who may not succeed in a regular classroom setting if they are not adequately prepared before reaching kindergarten. Children may be considered "at risk" because of mild developmental delays even if

they have not been diagnosed with a handicap.

Attention deficit disorder (ADD): diagnosis for some children who have difficulty paying attention at home or in school, staying focused until a task is completed, or following instructions. Group situations are difficult, and the child's attention problems may be exaggerated in a classroom where long periods of concentration are expected.

Autism: a neurological condition characterized by severe language difficulties and a tendency to withdraw from external stimulation.

Case study: process of systematic and comprehensive evaluation of a study. Components include interviewing the student, consulting with parents, studying social development, assessing adaptive behavior, assessing cultural background, medical history, learning environment.

Chronological age (C.A.): actual age measured in terms of months and years, e.g., a C.A. of 8-4 means eight years, four months. Generally noted at time of testing or evaluation.

Decoding: reading by breaking down printed words phonetically.

Deficit: shortage or deficiency. Usually relates to lack of skill or ability.

Developmental preschool: a function of special education that offers early and consistent intervention for children with mild to moderate handicaps. The purpose is to develop educational and social skills. A school district may offer several levels of developmental classes ranging from children who are expected to

enter regular kindergarten to those who will remain in special education throughout their schooling. Also known as Early Childhood Education.

Due process: the legal recourse available to parents of children in special education who disagree with the placement or goals established for their children by the school district.

Dyslexia: an impairment of the ability to read.

Echolalia (immediate and delayed): repetition of words spoken by another person, instead of original speech.

Educational assessment: evaluation that reveals a student's academic and processing strengths and weaknesses and academic levels of performance.

Expressive language: the ability to express original ideas in spoken language.

Gestalt processing of language: using patterns of language without breaking the whole down into its parts to derive meaning.

Handicapped: having a physical or mental disability that makes achievement in certain areas especially difficult.

Idiosyncratic use: use of a phrase or language construction in a peculiar way unique to an individual child.

IEP: Individualized Education Plan: the specific strategy outlined for a student in special education. The IEP contains long-term and short-term goals tailored for the child as well as standards by which

achievement is measured.

Impairment *(language):* a blockage or barrier to normal development and use of language which may be neurological in nature.

Intervention: therapy or educational action taken to laid a child in overcoming blockages to normal development, including the way language is learned and used or behavior is demonstrated.

Language acquisition: the pattern according to which language is learned and developed.

Learning style: refers to the child's preferred method of learning, e.g., through hearing, seeing, step-by-step approach, etc.

Least restrictive environment: the educational placement that is closest to a regular classroom setting yet is appropriate for a child with special needs. School districts are required by law to provide the least restrictive environment for children in special education programs.

Mainstreaming: placing children with learning disabilities or special physical needs in regular classroom settings with support services as needed.

Multidisciplinary conference: see *Staffing*

Noncompliance: behavior that does not conform to what is asked for or expected in a specific situation.

Non-categorial classroom: a special education placement that groups children with developmental delays without categorizing them further.

Occupational therapy: activity intended to promote specific physical and/or sensory skills that some children lack; requires a physician's prescription.

Pervasive developmental disorder (PDD): an impairment of the development of social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication.

Pronoun reversal: mixing up words like *he* and *she*, *him* and *her*, *you* and *me*.

Purge file: a course of action by which parents can permanently remove from their child's records any reports or evaluations that they believe are detrimental to planning educational strategies for that child.

Receptive language: language that is received auditorially or visually, as opposed to spoken (expressive) language.

Ritualistic behavior: repetitive patterns of activity or behavior that the child depends on to the point that accepting variations is difficult.

Self-stimulatory behavior ("self-stim"): behavior, such as hand-flapping or head-banging, that a child uses to stimulate himself or herself, as opposed to being stimulated or interested in the surroundings.

Short-term objectives: goals established for a child to achieve within a specified, brief period of time, such as a few weeks.

Speech therapy: treatment of speech and language disorders, including cognitive language concepts, pragmatic language and articulation problems.

Staffing: a meeting in which professionals from differ-

ent fields, such as health services, psychological services, social work and education, meet with parents to merge information and provide a complete picture of the child's special needs. Eligibility for special services are determined at staffings, and IEPs are agreed on.

Supportive services: transportation, classroom aides, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, learning disabilities tutoring, or other services intended to help a child gain the maximum benefit from an educational experience.

Resources

Selected Literature

Aram, D. M., and J. M. Healy. "Hyperlexia: A Review of Extraordinary Word Recognition." In *The Exceptional Brain*, edited by L. K. Obler and D. Fein, 70-102. New York: The Guilford Press, 1988

Reviews case studies of small groups and individual children considered hyperlexic. Offers definition of hyperlexia, along with general nonreading characteristics of hyperlexic children, including speech and language abilities, motor skills and other special talents. Concludes with suggestions for further research.

Cobrink, L. 1982. The performance of hyperlexic children on an "incomplete words" task. *Neuropsychologia* 20:569-578.

Compares the ability to decipher "incomplete" words, those having ambiguous letter formation, using hyperlexic children and a control group. Hyperlexic subjects outperformed the controls using such factors as rapidity of response. Theorizes that right hemispheric mediation of the brain might precipitate a unique form of reading.

Elliot, E., and R. Needleman. 1976. The syndrome of hyperlexia. *Brain and Language* 3:339-349.

Presents critical reviews of recent research on hyperlexia. Presents one case study of a generally mute female patient who was referred at five and a half years. She had demonstrated an interest in written words since the age of 15 months. Suggests connection of hyperlexia to an innate written language capacity.

Goldberg, T., and R. Rothermel. 1984. Hyperlexic children reading. *Brain* 107:769-785.

Study includes eight children who manifested early reading along with reading delays and difficulty in social relationships. WISC-R and PIAT test scores were used to assess behavior. Results included better comprehension of single words and sentences than paragraphs.

Healy, J. 1982. The enigma of hyperlexia. *Reading Research Quarterly* 3:319-338.

Briefly reviews prior studies and spells out specific questions the study would answer. Gives data from parent interviews and child testing, including cognitive, language, reading and oral commission tests. Discusses reading behaviors of hyperlexic children and implications for reading theory and practice.

Healy, J., D. Aram, S. Horwitz, and J. Kessler. 1982. A study of hyperlexia, *Brain and Language* 9:1-23.

Cites numerous prior studies and documents findings in tabular form. Examines developmental histories of 12 children. The subjects read early and had

superior word recognition skills, yet exhibited lags in cognitive and language development. Suggests a relationship between hyperlexia and familial dyslexia.

Huttenlocher, P., and J. Huttenlocher. 1973. A study of children with hyperlexia. *Neurology* 23:1107-1116.

Studies three male subjects who read precociously yet were intellectually slow and exhibited autistic behaviors. Notes limited comprehension of both spoken and written language. Suggests congenital developmental defect as a possible cause.

Mehegan, C., and F. Dreifuss. 1972. Hyperlexia. *Neurology* 22:1105-1111.

Subtitled, "Exceptional reading ability in brain-damaged children." Discusses 12 children with high-level reading skills. However, these subjects displayed mental retardation in other areas, along with delayed motor functioning and hyperactive behavior. In all cases, language had developed out of sequence.

Siegel, L. 1984. A longitudinal study of a hyperlexic child: hyperlexia as a language disorder. *Neuropsychologia* 22:577-585.

Compares perinatal data and development test information for two prematurely born girls. Although reading abilities were comparable, one child was not considered hyperlexic or hyperactive. Her IQ scores and visual motor skills greatly exceeded those of the other subject.

Silberberg, N., and M. Silberberg. 1967. Hyperlexia:

specific word recognition skills in young children. *Exceptional Children* 34:41-42.

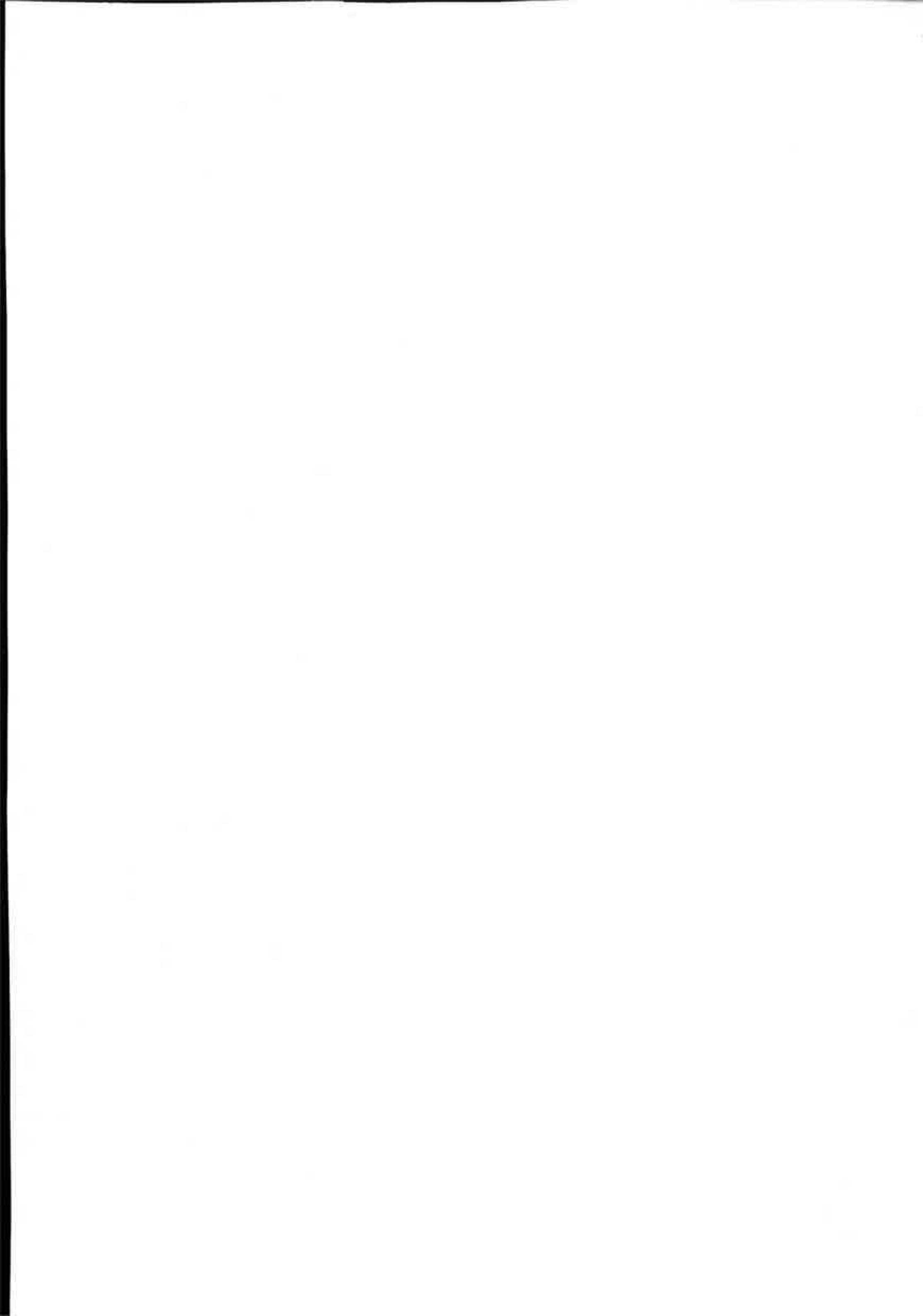
Silberberg, N. and M. Silberberg. 1980. Case histories in hyperlexia. *Journal of School Psychology*, 7:3-7.

Cites several case studies of children whose ability to recognize words noticeably exceeded their reading comprehension. Points out classroom difficulties such children may experience, and notes the importance of identifying such students.

ORGANIZATION

Center for Speech and Language Disorders was established in 1979 as a non-profit organization with offices in Lombard & Chicago. We are located at 310-D South Main St., Lombard, Illinois 60148, 630-652-0200. CSLD has received national recognition for its work with hyperlexic children. Offers full range of services and treatments for language disorders, including evaluation and determination if a child is showing hyperlexic characteristics.

*** Visit CSLD's website at www.csld.org**



Reading TOO Soon

- How can a child read so well but not understand what I say?
- How do I get my child's teacher to understand special needs?
- What can I do to teach my child language?
- Will my child be able to function as an independent adult?

Reading Too Soon, the first book of its kind, talks plainly to parents and other caring adults who face these questions. The author interviewed nearly two dozen parents of hyperlexic children. The content of this book is not academic or speculative; it is based on specific experiences of real families.

The term *hyperlexia* describes a syndrome marked by advanced reading skills at a young age accompanied by significant problems in language and social skills. Reading Too Soon moves beyond the curiosity of the unusual children who fit this description and ventures into practical approaches for helping them achieve their potential.

Aimed primarily at parents, Reading Too Soon will also be helpful to other family members, caregivers, teachers and therapists who want to see a hyperlexic child move toward successful independence.

About the Author:

Susan Martins Miller, the author of several novels for children and young adults, is the mother of a hyperlexic child. She is employed fulltime at a publishing company.