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The language of inclusion: Co-constructing inter-ability conversations between friends

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Abstract

Efforts to understand the social exclusion of school-aged children with language delays has frequently focussed on the problems children face, with less attention being paid to the language of successful inclusion[1]. We explored the nature of dyadic conversations between established friends[2] who have significantly different language abilities[3]. Part of a pilot project for a larger study, two same-aged pairs of primary school children (one aged 8 and the other 12) were recruited. In each pair, one child has Down syndrome (DS) and the other is typically developing (TD). Each pair was audio and video recorded as they played together in two one-hour sessions at the home of the child with DS, with materials supplied by the researcher and in activities they had established prior to the project. The children with DS also had a formal language assessment. Recordings were analysed for their linguistic and pragmatic features[4], evidence of the social roles played by each child, and for specific indicators of inclusion. Despite the differences in language development, reflected by differing levels of linguistic and turn complexity, both children co-constructed successful topic management through a similar range of speech acts, including asking questions, making suggestions, expressing both agreement and disagreement with each other, and asking for clarification. Both pairs actively engaged in imaginative role-play (playing pirates, inventing dialogues for toy people, etc.) with both participants using language appropriate to these fictitious roles. They also engaged in the exchange of metalinguistic and metacognitive ideas and expressed their feelings about both the activities and the relationship with their friend[5]. Importantly, the TD children actively resisted taking on didactic roles, avoided correcting the language of their partner, provided both explicit and implicit language learning opportunities, used invitational rather than directional language, and used complex quid pro quo strategies to ensure that both got what they wanted out of the play without undermining the success of the interactions[6]. Given the importance of mental health in all forms of language delay, the question is raised as to how to support and validate relationships such as these as primary school-aged children move into secondary education[7].