

## Scripting and the Autistic Child

“Don’t - don’t - don’t bite your friends.” Zeke looks earnestly into the face of his teacher, Ms. Ashley, and repeats the phrase, and repeats it again, this time gently grabbing her wrist for attention. “No TV talk,” she says firmly, “are you earning Yo Gabba Gabba?” Zeke appears to understand, and moves quietly towards the books on the rug. Ms. Ashley adds a velcro penny to a laminated chart of ten squares after Zeke looks at a book for 60 seconds. “Great job with no TV talk Zeke, you’ve earned a token!” He looks up in her direction with a small smile, then turns back to the book.

Zeke is a five year old boy with autism. He attends public kindergarten in a self-contained classroom with four other children on the spectrum. One way autism affects Zeke causes him to repeat a familiar word or phrase over and over. He becomes stuck on the phrase and can not focus on other tasks. This is known as scripting and is a common autistic behavior. Zeke scripts from Nick Jr. tv shows that he enjoys at home. His favorite show to script is called “Yo Gabba Gabba”.

The Fletcher-Maynard Academy staff, as demonstrated by Ms. Ashley in the example above, use Applied Behavior Analysis to redirect and adapt autistic behaviors. An autism specialist first observes the student extensively and interviews him, if possible, to determine what he most enjoys. Then a behavior plan is formalized with a Picture Exchange Communication Chart System which uses laminated images to represent the “earning” of a reward. The reward is based entirely on what the student most enjoys. Zeke’s favorite thing in the world is watching “Yo Gabba Gabba” and so that is what he works towards. For every minute without scripting Zeke earns a token, ten tokens and he gets to watch his favorite

show on the computer with headphones. Zeke appears to understand the ABA process; he is able to self-correct with prompts from the staff, he waits and anticipates the reward. Zeke expresses frustration with a frown when informed, “that’s TV talk no token”. Staff have noticed a decrease in Zeke’s scripting in just a few weeks. He receives 30 mins. of individual speech therapy per week and 30 minutes of speech group per week. Classroom teachers use continual language prompts and verbal cues.

Interestingly, Leo Kanner documents scripting by autistic children in many of his eleven case studies, from his seminal paper, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact", *Nervous Child 2* (1943): 217-250. Below are some quotes relating to scripting:

“He seemed to have much pleasure in ejaculating words or phrases, such as “Chrysanthemum”; “Dahlia, dahlia, dahlia”; “Business”; “Trumpet vine”; “The right one is on, the left one off”; “Through the dark clouds shining.” Irrelevant utterances such as these were his ordinary mode of speech.”

and,

“He got hold of an encyclopedia and learned about fifteen words in the index and kept repeating them over and over again.”--**case 1**

“...exclamations could be definitely traced to previous experiences. He was in the habit of saying almost every day, "Don't throw the dog off the balcony,"His mother recalled that she had said those words to him about a toy dog...” --**case 4**

“There was endless repetition of sentences. He had an excellent rote memory and could recite many prayers, nursery rhymes, and songs “in different languages”; the mother did a great deal of stuffing in this respect and was very proud of these “achievements”.” --**case 10**

“When she began to speak at about 5 years, she started out with complete though simple sentences that were “mechanical phrases” not related to the situation of the moment or related to it in a peculiar metaphorical way. She had an excellent vocabulary, knew especially the names and “classifications” of animals.” --**case 11**

Kanner’s conclusion states: “Almost all the parents reported, usually with much pride, that the children had learned at an early age to repeat an inordinate number of nursery rhymes, prayers, lists of animals, the roster of presidents, the alphabet forward and backward,

even foreign-language (French) lullabies. Aside from the recital of sentences contained in the ready-made poems or other remembered pieces, it took a long time before they began to put words together.”

These examples clearly demonstrate scripting behaviors, although the word is never used by Kanner or his contemporaries. With the exception of the subject matter, the scripting Kanner describes (without the label) in these cases from seventy years ago are strikingly similar to Zeke’s scripting today.

Another interesting difference between the scripting observed with Zeke at the Fletcher-Maynard and the Kanner case studies is the adult reactions. Many of the parents in the previous case studies pointed to the scripting as evidence of the child’s typical-ness or even exceptionality. They expressed pride and probably encouraged the scripting behavior. Contemporary teachers and parents have a different reaction to scripting, recognizing it as a disorder. Perhaps it is easier for us to dislike Nick Jr. songs. Perhaps parents found the scripting of hymns and psalms or the classifications of animals more difficult to disapprove of or correct. Ms. Ashley calmly redirects, “no TV talk” multiple additional times in response to “...don’t bite your friends” or adds tokens to Zeke’s chart for the remainder of rug time.

“...much has changed in the world of education, and in the amount of exposure children have to the world through the constant barrage of electronic media. But children’s development has not changed.” -p. 14, Yardsticks, Chip Wood (2007).

