



Pragmatic-communicative intervention strategies for victims of child abuse

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the need to continue progressing in the methodological and technical aspects of linguistic interventions with children who are victims of child abuse, so as to provide useful resources for professional practice. Language disorders in child abuse victims are areas of special interest, both for its negative consequences for the children and their involvement on a social level and their interpersonal adaptation. 21 children in residential care, between 8 and 12 years of age, participated in this study. A pragmatic-communicative intervention program, aimed at developing functional skills that allow the children to communicate effectively, is implemented. It aims to encourage the children's capacity for taking initiatives and creating conversational spontaneity. To do so, the conversational skills of making requests, narrative discourse and abstract and figurative language are all worked on, in order to incorporate these resources into the children's natural contexts. The pre-test/post-test evaluation of the children confirms the effectiveness of the intervention in victims of child abuse.

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1. Introduction

Language is, without a doubt, one of the most important factors that contributes to a child's development, as it is essential for both communication with peers and the representation of knowledge. A child's language development depends on the interaction between the child's potential capacities and his/her environment; so, when there are difficulties, a child does not adequately acquire the linguistic elements needed for the comprehension and production of language.

Different studies have tried to determine the problems experienced by children suffering abuse at any or all levels of language (Allen & Wasserman, 1985; Augoustinos, 1987; Cicchetti & Carlson, 1989; Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008; Moreno & García-Baamonde, 2009; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Blázquez, 2008, 2010, 2012; Moreno, García-Baamonde, Godoy, & Suárez, 2011; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Rabazo, 2007; Moreno, Rabazo, & García-Baamonde, 2006; Nair, Schuler, Black, Kettinger, & Harrington, 2003; Sylvestre & Mérette, 2010). These studies have confirmed that one of the fundamental characteristics is the difficulties they have with pragmatics (Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Blázquez, 2009; Moreno, García-Baamonde, Guerrero, & Blázquez, 2010).

Given that pragmatics includes both verbal and non-verbal communication; its strengths and weaknesses can be registered relatively independently of the other linguistic competences. Pragmatics is

related with the early development of social interaction, it being a process of social development in which the necessary knowledge is accumulated so as to be able to successfully deal with interpersonal aspects through language. This skill is not acquired suddenly; children need to develop such skills as the processing of information from different sources, an adequate linguistic development, the capacity to respond to social demands, etc. Children, besides learning the formal aspects of language, also have to learn to use them in a social context. It is necessary to recognize a person's intention over and above the literal meaning of what is said. To achieve this, children must be capable of adapting linguistic forms to the communicative act.

The evidence would seem to indicate that the interpretation of different situations made by children suffering from abuse is marked by the experiences they have lived through, as is the case with the way they express their emotions. It is only to be expected that the lack of any quality child–parent interaction should influence their socio-emotional and communicative development (Koponen, Kalland, & Autti-Rämö, 2009). Thus, they have problems in correctly attributing the message's intended meaning. Knowledge of the world and of what can be expected of others limits their capacity for interaction. This consideration is of great importance when the manifest problems are fundamentally of a pragmatic nature. What may stunt a child's linguistic development are: a lack of affection during the first years of infancy (Chaimay, Thinkhamrop, & Thinkhamrop, 2006; Prathanee, Thinkhamrop, & Dechongkit, 2007) and the communicative style of the carers, or the interference with, or lack of response to, a child's communication (Stanton-Chapman, Chapman, Bainbridge, & Scott, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 2002).

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Children in a situation of neglect would seem to have some defects in what O'Neil (1996) called socio-cognitive knowledge, the development of the ability to make social inferences from the actions, beliefs or intentions of other people, as well as the capacity to think about and reflect on their own mental states. On the other hand, children accept and interiorize the behavior of their parents, and respond according to the situation. Grusec and Goodnow (1994) relate interiorization with three aspects: the perception that children have of their parents' intentions (according to the clarity and coherence of the message, the child's capacity to interpret them, or their emotional state); the degree of acceptance of the said messages, which will be determined by the warmth in the relationship that the children maintain with their parents; and the degree to which children feel they have participated in the creation of the message. Manor, Shalev, Joseph, and Gross-Tsur (2001) stress the scarcity of internal language to direct their actions and the restricted use of language in children suffering from abuse.

For all these reasons, the objective of this work is to develop a methodological proposal aimed at a pragmatic-communicative intervention to encourage functional skills which can favor effective communication (conversational language, requests, narrative skills and abstract and figurative language), skills for relating to adults and to solving interpersonal problems (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Irwin, Carter, & Briggs-Gowan, 2002; Manor et al., 2001; Reynolds, 1998; Timler, 2003; Vigil, Hodges, & Klee, 2005). Similarly, children need to incorporate the linguistic resources worked on into natural contexts.

Thus, we hope to take a further step in favoring the adaptation of children who suffer abuse and in accelerating their linguistic development.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

21 children (7 males and 14 females between 8 and 12 years of age) in residential care participated in this study. Immigrant minors were not included, given that this would have supposed an important bias concerning the evaluation and intervention in pragmatic competence with respect to the degree of their knowledge of the language. Those children diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder or general development disorder were not included either.

2.2. Instrument

The revised version of the "objective language criteria test" (Revised BLOC-Screening) (Puyuelo, Renom, Solanas, & Wiig, 2002, 2006, 2007) was used to evaluate the children's pragmatic competence. This test aims to detect difficulties in the language components. It was designed to verify the level of dominion at 70% correct and above. The test gives an overall score with respect to the items, a percentile score and a transformed score with respect to the development curves. A percentile score of between 70 and 100 (upper level) indicates that the student dominates the psycholinguistic skill and can use it correctly; a percentile of between 60 and 70 indicates a transition level; a percentile of between 30 and 60 indicates an emergency level; while a percentile is on the lowest level if it is below 25 to 30 (level of alarm). This test has been shown to be effective for evaluating the linguistic development of minors suffering from abuse (Moreno, 2003, 2005; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Blázquez, 2010; Moreno, Rabazo, & García-Baamonde, 2007; Moreno et al., 2006, 2008, 2009; Puyuelo & Salavera, 2011).

Pragmatic competence is evaluated through the children's use of language in concrete communicative and social interaction situations, with respect to different functions or uses (induced language tasks). The children make statements using a graphic scene (the vet's surgery) in which different characters appear in various communicative

contexts. The children are told what the character's intentions are and from there they must construct a statement that achieves the aims of such an intention. To do so, they must put themselves in the communicative situation of the character (either a child or an adult) and say in direct speech what such a character would say in that particular context.

The pragmatics is evaluated through 13 aspects: greetings and goodbyes; demanding attention; petition/concession/refusal of permission; demanding specific information; demanding confirmation or negation; who/what (what...of, which, whose, what...with); where/when; for whom/to whom; why/how; making comments, showing approval or disapproval; direct demands for action; indirect demands for action; and protests.

2.3. Procedure

The Revised BLOC-Screening test was administered individually in the residential care centers in which the children were residing. The evaluation of the pragmatic component for each child lasted 90 min. The exploration was carried out by 4 evaluators. In order to guarantee maximum validity, reliability and objectivity in the data gathering, the evaluators were previously instructed on how to apply the instrument.

The children were given the Revised BLOC-Screening twice, before and after the application of the pragmatic-communicative intervention program.

3. Pragmatic evaluation (pre-test)

The results of the BLOC-Screening show that all the children have problems with the pragmatic component. If the fact that the test was designed to verify the level of dominion starting from 70% correct answers is taken into account, it can be seen that all the children are below the 70–100 (upper level) percentile score. This indicates that the children do not dominate pragmatic competence and that they have difficulties in using it correctly. The percentage of children below the 60 percentile is 95.2%, while 23.8% are at the alarm level, 71.4% at the emergency level and 4.8% in the transition level. None of the children are in the upper level (see Table 1).

The data indicate that the children have difficulties in placing themselves in the position of the person they are communicating with, especially if that person is an adult. There are evident limitations in the adequate use of language, such as: a resource to demand attention so that the recipient will respond, as well as for direct and indirect calls for action (the adequate formulation of a specific demand or suggestion); to make a petition, especially in those situations in which something must be requested from an important adult or figure of affection; they sometimes find it difficult to maintain continuity in a discourse, jumping from one topic to another; they may have difficulties asking for more information or explanations about a particular event; they may express disgust or displeasure in an inadequate way; they may also have little skill in showing disagreement with an authority figure (parents or teachers); they have limitations

Table 1

Distribution of the subjects according to their level of pragmatic dominion (BLOC-Screening).

	n	%
70–100: upper level	–	–
60–70: transition	1	4.8
30–60: emergency	15	71.4
Below 25–30: alarm	5	23.8
n	21	100

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