



# Learning from Dylan

A blog about parenting and teaching through the ups and downs of CHARGE Syndrome

## Learning language VS learning through language

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Last week I was fortunate to be able to attend a workshop by Millie Smith for teachers of students with vision impairments and other disabilities. Millie talks the language of education and cognitive development based on Piaget and Gibson. I talk the language of deafblindness. We both talk about the brain and readiness to learn and the neurologically driven shut down or flare up that occurs when teaching is attempted at a level too far above the student's readiness.

I was writing every word, as she unknowingly helped me figure out questions I had about the success of Dylan's School-Home, such as why did Dylan's development change so much when we started School-Home? Why did it seem like his development had gone back to Preschool where it had gotten stuck and started over? Of course, I can't share everything in one little blog, so go hear Millie when you can and utilize her resources from American Printing House for the Blind. In the meantime I will share this one aha concept.

According to Piaget, children in the sensorimotor stage of cognitive development learn through objects, people, places, and activities. In this stage they learn language, but do not learn through language. Yes, I know this about babies. Sounds completely appropriate for typically developing birth to two or three year olds, but what about those students who remain in that stage beyond three? What do they need? They need continued opportunities to touch what they can see, so their brain can make sense of it from all directions. They need to interact with what they touch and see—even with the tiniest of movements—for memory / learning to occur. They need routines, and repetition to learn cognitive skills such as anticipation, motivation, and memory.

The problem I see for many deafblind students is they seem to be far above this developmental level in so many ways, yet they continue to need to pair touch and action with sensory input to anchor it. That is they may be beyond the sensorimotor stage of cognitive development, but remain sensory motor learners. It brings to mind the academic level student who was trying to form a concept between the different forms of wells by looking at pictures in a dictionary. Without having been to a water well or a wishing well let alone been able to touch the abstract concepts of feeling well and "well", you know "well", it was literally beyond her grasp. Then there is Dylan who understands many signs used in familiar routines. Many of these signs we think he knows outside of the routines, but I was reminded today how he can use those signs in context and with the exact same object, but he cannot use them to learn something new.

A bit of background for this story:

Dylan loves space shuttles. He likes to watch videos of them launching. He likes to form the sign and have his hand vibrate and then launch in the air. He has two toy shuttles that he pretends with—yes pretends—driving the shuttle to the launch area, raising up the shuttle and the launch pad, having it lift off, having the rocket boosters fall into the ocean, taking the astronaut out to do his work, and then getting back in for landing. Since Dylan hasn't been in space or touched a real space shuttle, or been to a launch it's not a topic I would have chosen, yet it is the topic Dylan chose. I can't tell you how Dylan's concepts around space and space shuttles match with mine, but regardless it is a topic he continues to enjoy, and surprisingly seems to "get."



He also likes kites. He has experience making and flying kites and is familiar with the sign for kite. In fact he likes most things that he can make go up into the air, toy rockets, balloons, helicopters...

So Deb (his Intervener) was so excited when she found a large 3D kite in the shape of a space shuttle for his birthday. Space shuttle plus kite, she was sure Dylan would love it.

Dylan recognized the shuttle on the package and seemed interested, even though it was a low energy day, and he was lying in his chair. We paired it with his toy shuttle and signed shuttle. We also signed kite and kite flying.



Putting the kite together took some time, but Dylan remained interested, even during the delays, as we tried to figure out the next step. (Yes, I know we should have practiced before hand so we'd be ready to help Dylan do it without long pauses, but in our defense it was a newly opened present.)

The new kite seemed to be missing one stick to keep the tail open, so I went to get one of Dylan's old kites to salvage parts from. As I walked back into the room, Dylan looked from the old traditionally shaped kite I was carrying to the space shuttle shaped kite we were building and laughed out loud. With that laugh I think he got that we weren't just building another toy shuttle that he would hold in his hands and pretend to fly, but that we were building a space shuttle kite and he was going to actually be able to fly it in the air.

Although I can't tell you what cognitive stage Dylan is at—it's been years since he's had a formal assessment—I can tell you he continues to learn best through objects, people, places, and activities. Through this active exploration, he is learning language, but he is not learning through language. Does this sound like other students you know? What do you do to help your students learn without relying on language?