Non-literal Language

Non-literal or figurative language is language that goes beyond the dictionary meaning of words or phrases – not using words in their usual or most basic sense.

- Writers use a lot of non-literal language to help readers better understand something or gain a more detailed picture in their minds.
- Writers and speakers also often use common non-literal expressions, called idioms, to indicate something beyond what the words actually mean.

The main kinds of non-literal language are:

- **Similes –** figures of speech that directly compare two things, usually using 'like' or 'as'. For example, "She felt as cold as ice", "I slept like a log".
- **Metaphors -** phrases that are used to make a comparison between two things that aren't alike but have something in common. For example, "The snow is a white blanket", "Their home was a prison".
- **Idioms –** words or phrases that don't mean exactly what they say; they have a hidden meaning that is not often easy to work out from the words! For example, "A penny for your thoughts", "Let the cat out of the bag".
- **Puns -** jokes exploiting the different possible meanings of a word, or the fact that there are words which sound alike but have different meanings. For example, "I was struggling to figure out how lightning works, then it struck me!", "Reading while sunbathing makes you well red/read".
- **Hyperbole –** figures of speech that use exaggeration to express strong feelings. For example, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!", "They had been walking so long that John thought he might drink the entire lake when they found it".

When young people move from primary to secondary school, the level of non-literal language used in the curriculum, the classroom and socially, increases greatly.

- The curriculum begins to contain lots of different non-literal language features – especially in English lessons, but they could also pop up in other subjects too! GCSE and A-level exams particularly contain a lot of higher-level language in the questions – an understanding will be vital to be able to answer these questions correctly.
- Teachers may use non-literal language when explaining topics, setting work or talking to students.
- Classmates and friends may use non-literal language socially - at break times and lunchtimes, when travelling to and from school, during group work in lessons, or during social situations outside of school.
- Books, magazines, newspapers, TV shows and films more suited to a secondary school aged audience will more than likely also contain non-literal language in various forms.

As you can see, non-literal language becomes a huge part of language overall during the secondary school years!

- Deaf young people often miss out on learning language 'incidentally', for example hearing it spoken by adults or peers, or hearing it on the TV or radio.
- This means they are likely to miss out on learning non-literal language too!
- They may take non-literal words and phrases in a very literal sense, for example believing that "let the cat out of the bag" literally means to let a cat get out of a bag!
- Deaf young people may need to be specifically taught non-literal language. They need to hear the phrases, see the phrases on the lips, and see the phrases written down. Visual representation of these features is important to help with spelling and pronunciation, and will help our teens to build a better understanding of new non-literal language features.

- Putting these new language features into context is also very important – hearing and seeing new phrases, and learning the meanings, may not be enough for teens to fully learn them. Talking about pronunciation, providing real-life examples of when these features can be used, and using visual reinforcements, will all support their learning.

Activity ideas for developing the understanding and use of non-literal language at home
- **Create a non-literal language book.** This works well when you are out and about – a simple notebook will work well! 4 columns may be a good idea: phrase, definition, picture and sentence/example. Write any new phrases you come across into the book – talk about the meaning, then either add this immediately, or when you get home. Discuss the new phrases again when you get home, and add pictures, sentences and anything else you feel is useful!
- **Use books/magazines/newspapers and TV/films as opportunities.** When your teenager is reading or watching TV, ask them to write down any phrases they are unsure of (or pick out some phrases you think they will be unfamiliar with). Talk about these phrases afterwards, and add them to your non-literal language book.
- **Phrase-picture-meaning match.** Create simple cards with pictures, phrases and definitions on. Jumble all of the cards up – your teenager then has to match the phrases, pictures and definitions up correctly. When they are getting good at the matching, try taking away the picture cards to make the activity more challenging. For an even bigger challenge, try putting just the phrase cards out and telling them the definition – the young person then has to find the correct phrase. You can swap this around – have the definition cards out and tell them the phrase.
- **Acting/role play.** Choose some interesting non-literal language features, and work together to create a short conversation for each one. Then practice acting out your conversations – you can make this as fun as you like!
- **Play non-literal language bingo!** You can draw out your own bingo grids, or use websites such as http://osric.com/bingo-card-generator/ or http://myfreebingocards.com/bingo-card-generator . Place non-literal phrases onto the bingo grids, then ask someone to read out the meanings in a random order – see who can get a line first, or complete their grid first! You can also swap this around, placing the meanings onto the bingo grids and reading out the phrases.
- **Rewrite a story/article using non-literal language.** Find a suitable short article or story, either from a book/newspaper magazine or on the Internet. See if your teenager can rewrite the story, or just a short section of it, including as many non-literal language features as possible! To make this task more difficult, ask your teenager to make up their own story using lots of non-literal language.

Remember, with all these activities, to go over the new non-literal language features on a regular basis – this will help your son/daughter to remember them.

Enjoy the conversations you have with your child. Daily life is full of opportunities to help children continue to develop good communication skills into adolescence. Have fun! ☺

The speech and language therapy department hope that these ideas will help you to develop your teenager's non-literal language at home. If you have any questions or would like to know more, please contact your son/daughter's speech therapist via email or telephone.

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