

CHILDREN'S SPEECH DEVELOPMENT

WHY IS TALKING SO HARD?

As children, we all went through the complex process of developing communication skills. As adults, we take these skills for granted, and often forget just how difficult the learning process really is.

Try to think what you do to make the "k" sound. What about when you say "r" or "s" ? The lips, tongue, throat and mouth need to be well co-ordinated to produce the complicated movements required for all the different sounds of speech.

IS IT JUST LAZINESS WHEN MY CHILD DOESN'T SPEAK PROPERLY?

NO! Laziness is never the cause of a speech problem, because everyone wants to be understood.

Communication is one of the most important parts of being human, and not being able to communicate effectively can be very frustrating.

There are many rewards for getting your message across, and being understood. Clear speech allows children to:

- mix with other people
- ask for things they need (or want!)
- say "no"
- complain
- make friends, and be part of a group

These everyday experiences are powerful motivation for clear and understandable speech and language. Few children therefore, would choose to be hard to understand.

SO WHY CAN SHE SAY SOME WORDS BUT NOT OTHERS?

During the process of developing speech, children go through stages when they can say a small number of words quite clearly, while others remain unclear. Some words may actually sound nothing like they are meant to!

Parents often think "If my child can say some words correctly shouldn't all the words be clear?". Some words are easier than others however, as children generally learn different sounds at different stages.

CHECKLIST

75% of Australian children can say these sounds at these ages:

3 years p b m w h t d n

4 years f l sh y k g

5 years ch s z j

6 years r v double sounds like "bl" or "fr"

7-8 years th

Sometimes children can say a sound by itself, but cannot remember to use it in their conversation. They may be able to say the sounds at the start of a word but not at the end. Often children may be able to say a word while copying you, but forget when you're not around to show them. This is all a normal part of learning speech.

I WONDER IF THERE IS A PROBLEM?

A good rule of thumb is that by three years, your child should be understandable 80-90% of the time.

Some other points that may indicate that your child is experiencing difficulty with his speech are:

- If other family members or friends have difficulty understanding
- If your child seems embarrassed or frustrated by not being able to get his message across
- If your child avoids speaking to others

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Whether your child is going through normal speech and language development, or if there is a communication problem, it is important to be aware of self-esteem, and to be as supportive as possible.

- give your child time to talk
- wherever possible, give your full attention when your child is talking
- focus on what your child is saying, rather than on how it is being said
- be positive about all of your child's attempts at speech
- repeat words your child has difficulty saying, so she can hear the correct way to say it. Take care though, not to put her under pressure to say the word perfectly herself.

If you are at all unsure about your child's speech development, see a Speech Pathologist - if there is a problem, the sooner you bring your child in for therapy, the more successful he is likely to be.

EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

- **How do children learn to talk?**

Learning to talk is a difficult process, and takes young children years to get to the point where they can engage in general conversation. The following checklist gives some idea of what young children are generally able to do, at what ages...

AGE	LANGUAGE SKILLS
6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• plays at making sounds or noises while alone or with others, and babbles to get attention• vocalises eagerness, displeasure, while playing with toys...
12 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• able to say "mum" and "dad", as well as one or two other words
18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• uses 10 - 20 "real" words, along with a great deal of "jargon" - made-up words are used as though they formed part of a real conversation• copies many words heard in conversation
2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• starting to join 2-3 words together into a sentence• vocabulary of approximately 200 words• refers to self by own name
2 1/2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• rapid vocabulary expansion - can say 500+ words• beginning to ask "what", "where" questions• names at least one colour, sings simple songs, and enjoys nursery rhymes
3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• starting to use more complex grammar, in sentences of 4 - 5 words• can relate experiences that occurred 2-3 days ago• can count to five• can get his message across clearly, 80 - 90 % of the time
4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• routinely converses in sentences, bosses and criticises others• names body parts and four colours• uses past and future tenses, plurals, and other parts of language - in general, sentences are grammatically correct.

- **He doesn't talk much, but he seems to understand everything I say...**

It is an established fact that children's *understanding* of language develops before their ability to *use* it does - children can follow simple directions such as "Give Matt the doll and the little ball" long before they could possibly give the same directions.

It is not uncommon for understanding of language to develop normally, while the ability to use language may be delayed. In some cases though, children's understanding of language may also be slow to develop.

- **Is my child slow to start talking? I wonder if there's a problem?**

Referral to a Speech Pathologist, who can determine whether your child is experiencing significant difficulties learning to talk, should be made if:

- * you or your family members are at all concerned about your child's speech
- * your child is frustrated by her difficulty in communicating
- * your child, by:
 - 18 months: is not using a variety of single words
 - 2 years: is not using 2-word sentences
 - 3 years: is not regularly using sentences to communicate
 - 4 years: sentences are consistently immature or ungrammatical
- * at any age, your child is having difficulty understanding what is said to him

Why is she slow to talk?

Children may be slow to develop spoken language for the following reasons:

- * a history of ear infections and mild hearing loss, preventing children from hearing the language they are supposed to be learning.
- * there may be no *need* to talk
 - * siblings anticipate what the child wants
 - * the child gets what she wants by using actions, pointing, grunting etc...
- * a lot of energy may be placed into developing excellent skills in other areas of learning (the child may be great at puzzles, building blocks, or climbing on gym equipment...), almost at the expense of language development.
- * the muscles in the mouth may not be adequately developed to make speech sounds clearly
- * general developmental delay
- * sometimes there is simply *no* tangible reason!

- **What can we do to help?**

- Be positive about any attempts that your child makes at learning new words and sounds, and try not to pressure him to "perform"
- Encourage your child to *vocalise* to request things such as a "drink", a 'biscuit", or to get "up", rather than just pointing or gesturing
- Try to ask your child choice questions, rather than questions that require only a "yes" (nod) or "no" (shake) response
 - eg: "Would you like *milk* or *orange juice*?" rather than.....
 - "Do you want a drink?"

- Play games where vocalisation is fun and rewarding. “Peek-a-boo” is a good one, as are many nursery rhymes and songs.
- Talk to your child about what you are doing while she is with you.

If you are still concerned, make a referral to a Speech Pathologist - the sooner your child receives help, the more successful therapy is likely to be.
