

The Sound of Speech - the ages and stages of children's speech

Please read the Important Notice on the reverse of this Fact Sheet.

Learning to communicate is a step by step process for all children. A newborn communicates by crying, a six month old experiments with sounds, an eleven month old utters her first word, a three year old can string a four word sentence together, and by age five, most children can be understood by anyone.

Many parents wonder if their children's speech and language is developing normally. Most children's speech becomes clearer gradually, as they hear and use sounds, words and sentences. Be aware, too, that ear infections are common in children and they can interfere with sound development. While children develop individually, there is a general pattern to children's sound development.

Between birth and three years, children will attempt:

- lip sounds - p, b, m, w
- tongue tip sounds - t, d, n
- back of the mouth sounds - k, g
- other sounds - h, y

Most children will say these sounds clearly by the time they are three.

Sucking, learning to bite and chew, as well as putting objects in their mouths are all important. These behaviours help children become aware of their mouth parts and to control and to change mouth positions.

By four and a half years, children will also attempt:

- tongue tip sounds - s, z
- middle of the mouth sounds - sh, ch
- other sounds - l, j, f

Most children can be understood most of the time by this age. Their speech may become less clear if they are tired, unwell or excited.

Songs, rhymes, play, books, talking and listening to other children all help them to sort out word and sound patterns.

By eight and a half years, children can say:

- all of the sounds clearly
- the last sounds to develop are - v, th, r

Some children take extra time to blend sounds together, for example, tree, plane and desk.



Children learning more than one language

Children in bilingual families, or who are learning more than one language, may need longer to learn sounds. This is because there may be extra sounds to learn for one language, and it takes time to use the correct sounds for each language. Reading, writing and spelling can help children to learn the difference between sounds.

Learning to use sounds

Children may make mistakes when they begin to talk. They may:

- say an easier sound for a difficult one, such as tar for car, wing for ring
- leave out sounds, such as boa for boat
- leave out parts of words, such as te'phone for telephone
- mix up the order of sounds, such as psghetti for spaghetti
- say one sound instead of two or more, such as pane for plane, bider for spider

Sometimes children make several mistakes in one sentence. For example, "let's go to the park" may sound like "wes do t u part."

Helping children to learn sounds

- Enjoy sounds - as your child learns new sounds, imitate them.
- When you don't understand a word or a sentence, gently say so ... and then try and work it out together. When necessary, ask your child to show you the object they are talking about.
- Check that you have got a message right.
- Expect some mistakes. Learning to talk takes years.
- Listen to what children say, rather than every sound.
- Speak clearly and simply. Talk together often.

When to seek help

If you are worried, about your child's speech, if your child sounds different to the ages and stages outlined, or if your three year old cannot be understood by adults, you may need to seek help from a speech pathologist.

A speech pathologist has been professionally trained to advise, diagnose and work with adults and children who have difficulty in communicating. Speech pathologists work in a variety of settings including schools, health centres, hospitals and private practice.

Your child health nurse may be able to put you in contact with a speech pathologist.

Most speech pathologists belong to Speech Pathology Australia, which is the official body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability.

References

Please contact Speech Pathology Australia's National Office for the references used to create this Fact Sheet.

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