

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SPEECH SOUND DIFFICULTIES IN THE EARLY YEARS

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Recognising Typical and Atypical Development

When working with children in the early years we are aware that children do not usually speak clearly from day one. Children develop their use of speech sounds through generally recognised typical patterns. As adults, we are familiar with young children's speech and are usually proficient at interpreting the speech attempts of children who are known to us and are following typical patterns.

First let's refresh our memories on when children typically begin using particular sounds in their speech. This table tells you at what age 50% and 90% of children will be able to produce each sound in English.

		50% OF CHILDREN CAN SAY BY	90% OF CHILDREN CAN SAY BY
VOWEL SOUNDS		18 MONTHS	3 YEARS
P, B, T, D, M, N, W		2 YEARS	3 YEARS
K, G, F, S, H, Y		2.5 YEARS	4 YEARS
NG, L		3.5 YEARS	5 YEARS
SH, CH, J, Z, V		4 YEARS	6 YEARS
R, TH		5 YEARS	7 YEARS

(McLeod & Crowe 2018)

BY:	AN UNFAMILIAR ADULT CAN UNDERSTAND THIS PERCENTAGE OF WHAT YOUR CHILD SAYS:
3 YEARS	66%
3.5 YEARS	75%
4 YEARS	85%
4.5 YEARS	90%
5 YEARS	95%

(Bowen, 2011)

Another way of looking at it is to measure how much of what the child says can be understood by a non-familiar adult.

Children typically make predictable errors when these sounds are developing. Children under 3 years may miss off the ends of words e.g. 'bus' pronounced "bu". Sounds that should be made at the back of the mouth (k,g) are pronounced at the front instead as 't' and 'd'. Long sounds like 'ffffff', 'th', 'sh' and 'sssss' are replaced by the closest short sound, so 'f' is pronounced 'b' and 's' is pronounced as 't' or 'd' (Bowen, 1998). The cartoon character Tweety Pie's cry of "I tawt I taw a puddy tat!", adds to his charm and innocence but is also easily understood by us as he is using some of these typical patterns.

When children are showing different patterns e.g. pronouncing sounds at the back of their mouth so 'dog' is pronounced "gog" it is much harder for adults to understand them. Children who are learning sounds in an unusual order or are more difficult to understand than you would expect for their age should be referred to Speech and Language Therapy (RCSLT, 2024).

Why does it matter?

Children who have difficulty being understood are at risk of becoming frustrated or withdrawn (Poulter & Skinner 2024). If adults aren't able to build on what the child says it also means they are missing out on the benefits of high-quality interactions. They are likely to have difficulties learning and retaining new vocabulary if they are unable to say it. Finally, children with speech sound difficulties are more likely to have difficulties with literacy when they move up to school (Stackhouse and Wells, 1997). Being able to say and hear the differences in sounds is essential for the phonological awareness skills that underpin reading and spelling.

So what now?

Unfortunately, there is likely to be a waiting time for speech and language therapy and speech sound work is often specific to each child so it can leave us feeling a bit unsure what to do to support these children. Here are 3 areas you can begin with to prepare children for speech sound work if it is needed:

1. Communicating with confidence.

Children with speech sound difficulties may still have good language skills so we want to continue to support that. Continue to support their language skills by modelling new vocabulary and extending their utterances. We want to encourage their confidence and avoid children becoming self-conscious or reluctant to speak. The following tips can help:

- Respond to what the child is saying rather than how they are saying it.
- Accept the child's speech attempts as their best effort. Children are not lazy when it comes to speech sounds; it is just that they are not ready and/or able to use the correct ones.
- Use alternative methods of communication where necessary e.g. drawing, showing, pictures, signs, symbols etc.
- Set up a home/school book so parents and school staff can liaise about what the child has done at home and in school. This means you will have some context to work from when the child is talking.
- Model back the correct word if the child uses the incorrect sounds. Do not ask the child to repeat the word they are unlikely to be able to correct it.
- Reflect back any of the words you have understood to show the child that you have been listening.
- Acknowledge to the child when you have not understood and ask them to tell you again. If you still don't understand, ask them to show you what they mean if possible.

2. Listening & Phonological Awareness

Speech sound therapy is all about listening to sounds - the ones the therapist makes and the ones the child makes themselves. Games that require children to listen to and identify sounds make great preparation.

Phonological awareness is an essential skill for children learning new vocabulary and starting to learn to read. It is the understanding of how sounds fit together to make words. It's also important for children learning to pronounce new sounds and work out where they go. Phonological awareness activities include splitting words into syllables, identifying words that rhyme and listening to what sound a word starts with. Phonological awareness activities on their own won't cure speech sound difficulties but they help children develop the skills they need to get the most out of speech sound therapy (Gillon, 2004).

Examples of Listening Games:

- Hiding a ticking clock and listening to find it
- Listening walk - what can you hear out and about
- Sound lotto
- Guess the object/animal by the sound it makes

Examples of Phonological awareness activities:

- Songs and Rhymes
- Rhyming stories
- I spy something beginning with...
- Sound monsters - have a range of objects on the tray and a puppet monster who eats things starting with 'p' for example. Can the children find the right things?
- Sound walks - can you collect (or spot) things beginning with a certain sound?

3. Playing with sounds

Children whose speech has been corrected in the past may not feel confident about trying new sounds. We want speech sound therapy to be fun. You can help prepare them for this by playing games making silly sounds. These can be symbolic sounds like animal noises or include speech sounds. Don't worry if children aren't making them exactly right at this stage; the idea is just to have fun with sounds.

Examples of some activities to try include:

- Songs and Action Rhymes
- Musical Instruments - can you copy rhythms and can you copy the sounds with your voice - tum-ti-tum, bang, ping, etc.
- Pull funny faces in the mirror and blow raspberries, make silly sounds.
- Use animal sounds when reading stories, playing with the farm, zoo and so on.
- Play using a variety of voices; loud and quiet voices, a happy voice, a grumpy voice.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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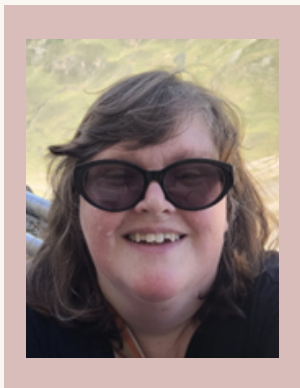
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THANK YOU FOR READING

Helen Harron qualified as a speech and language therapist in 1993. She has worked for 30 years predominantly with pre-school and primary school aged children with a wide range of speech, language and communication needs in the NHS, voluntary and independent sectors. She is the co-owner of Seaside SaLT (Speech and Language Therapy), a not-for-profit company based in Scarborough providing speech and language therapy services to children from 0-18 along the North Yorkshire Coast.

