



SPEECH



What is Speech?

Speech is the physical production of sounds. These sounds (consonants and vowels) are produced in sequences to create words. Producing speech sounds involves the muscles, nerves and brain working together to plan and execute movements of the tongue, lips, palate, and jaw.

What is a speech disorder?

Children with speech disorders display difficulties or an inability to produce the sounds required for normal speech. This can make their speech difficult for listeners to understand.

As children develop speech they will naturally make errors. For example, we can all think of a child who says “wabbit” instead of “rabbit”! These developmental errors are generally not considered disordered unless they occur at an inappropriate age. For example, most children can correctly say “sh” by the age of four and a half years, so the six year old child who has difficulty saying “sh” would be considered to have a speech delay. For more information please refer to the ‘what is normal’ fact sheet.

There are two main types of speech disorders. An articulation disorder is when the child is unable to make the sound entirely, for example, due to poor coordination of mouth movements, or nerve damage following a stroke. Alternatively if a child can make the sound correctly, but is having difficulty producing the sound in meaningful words and sentences it is called a phonological disorder.

What causes a speech disorder?

For most children with speech disorders there is no obvious reason why they produce sounds incorrectly; however some known causes are:

- structural abnormalities, such as cleft palate or velocardial facial syndrome N.B. sound errors may remain after the cleft has been repaired;
- sensory deficit, such as hearing loss;
- ‘tongue thrust’;
- nervous system disorders, such as childhood apraxia of speech and cerebral palsy.

What are some facts about speech disorders?

- It is estimated that 386,000 children in Australia have speech disorders.
- Speech development occurs gradually over a number of years and for many children it is not until the age of nine when they can articulate all sounds accurately. For more information see the information sheet “What is Normal?”
- If untreated, there is a risk that some children with speech disorders may develop social interaction problems and/or language learning difficulties.

What should I do if I think my child has a speech disorder?

It is important to remember that every child develops differently. For more information about normal development please see the information sheet “What is Normal?” If you are concerned about your child’s speech please contact a speech pathologist available at www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au . If your child is school aged their educational facility may provide a speech pathology service. Your child’s teacher can give you more details in relation to this service. A speech pathologist is trained to assess your child’s speech and determine its appropriateness. If necessary they will work closely with you to treat any speech disorder.

The Royal Children's Hospital consults with clients who require a second opinion due to the complexity of the speech disorder, who have specific disorders, or who are inpatients of the hospital.

What can I do to help my child develop speech?

- Use speech that is clear and simple for your child to imitate.
- If you don't understand something your child says, gently say so and then try to work it out together. If necessary, ask your child to show you the object they are talking about and then model the correct production of the word.
- Expect your child to make some mistakes! This is part of normal development.
- Listen to what your child is saying, rather than every sound.
- Talk with your child often.