The Sound of Speech: preschool and school aged children

The ages and stages of children's speech development

Speech Pathology Australia

Learning to speak is a crucial part of a child's development and progress made in the preschool and early school years is crucial to mastering the rules of language.

Even though children vary in their development of speech and language, there are certain 'milestones' that can be identified as a rough guide to normal development. Typically, these skills must be reached at certain ages before more complex skills can be learned. These milestones help speech pathologists determine whether a child may need extra help to learn to speak or use language.

Preschool children: 3 to 5 years

Preschool children start to use much longer sentences, yet their speech should still be understood by unfamiliar people (outside of the family) about 75% of the time. By 5 years of age, anyone (including unfamiliar listeners) should be able to understand the child's speech in conversation 95-100% of the time.

What can most children do?

- By 4 years, children can say most sounds correctly (e.g., m, n, h, w, p, b, t, d, k, g, ng, f, y, s, z, ch, j, sh, l). They can use many consonant clusters, which are combinations of two or more sounds (e.g., tw, sp, gl). Children may use clusters at the start (e.g., blue) or end of words (e.g., hand). Also, children will say most vowel sounds in words correctly (e.g., ay, oh, ee).
- Between 4-5 years, preschool children start to develop skills that will be important for learning to read and write (called "pre-literacy skills"). They become aware that spoken words can rhyme (e.g., cat – bat), and can be broken into syllables/beats (e.g., am-bu-lance).

What do many children still find difficult?

- Some sounds are later to develop and children may still have difficulty with them at this age. For instance, preschool children commonly have difficulty with "r" (e.g., saying "wed" for red), "v" (e.g., saying "berry" for very), and "th" (e.g., saying "fank you" for thank you)
- Some children are still developing the ability to use consonant clusters (e.g., scribble and strawberry), or to say all the sounds correctly in longer words (e.g., caterpillar and spaghetti). Some children may still produce "s" as "th" (e.g., a lisp)

What can parents do to help?

If parents are concerned about their child's speech development, they are advised to have their child's hearing checked by an audiologist as hearing is important in learning how to say sounds correctly. Also, parents can visit a speech pathologist if concerned about their child's speech development. In particular, a visit to the speech pathologist is recommended if children cannot be understood, if they are frustrated with attempts to communicate, if their speech appears very effortful, if they are using very few words, or if they are not using sounds at the start of words (e.g., saying "ish" for fish).

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School aged children: 5+ years

When children commence school, their speech should be easily understood by everyone.

What can most children do at this age?

- Be able to say all the sounds well and be starting to recognise that spoken sounds can be matched to written letters
- Hear and make rhyming words, hear and count syllables/beats in words, and make sentences with words that start with the same sound (e.g., big brown bear). Children can tell you what the first sound is in their name and what the letter is called and can break up the sounds in a small word (e.g., "c-a-t")

What do many children still find difficult?

Children might still have trouble with "th" sounds (e.g., thumb, this) until 8-9 years, and might have difficulty saying sounds such as "s" and "z" when their front teeth fall out

Children can produce clusters of sounds together, but may still have trouble with individual sounds (e.g., such as /r/ and /l/) in consonant clusters (e.g., "scwatch" for scratch) or in longer words (e.g., hippopotamus, pumpkin)

What can parents do to help?

To help children develop pre-literacy skills, parents can read to children, sing songs and play rhyming games, or games such as "I spy" which encourage children to think about sounds and letters. Parents can contact a speech pathologist if they have concerns about speech or pre-literacy development.

If your child doesn't meet these milestones…

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 or GP can put you in contact with a speech pathologist.

How do I become a speech pathologist?
Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree. To find out more go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?
Go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.