

Fact sheet: How speech sounds develop



As children hear and use sounds, words and sentences, their speech gradually becomes clearer. Children develop individually, however there are general patterns to their sound development. Ear infections are common in children and can interfere with speech 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 the mouth 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.

Songs, rhymes, play, books, talking and listening to other children help them to sort out and learn 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 can make many mistakes in one sentence!

How to help your child learn the 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.
- Show your child how to make the sound that is tricky
- Listen to what children say, rather than every sound.
- Speak clearly and simply. Talk together often.
- Expect some mistakes. Learning to talk takes years.

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.

More information

More information is available at Benalla Health.

Phone (03) 5761 4500 and ask to speak to a speech pathologist.