

Fact Sheet:

Speech Sound Development in Preschool Children

In Speech Pathology, “speech” refers to the pronunciation of sounds. Clear speech is important for effective communication. It supports children to be understood when sharing their needs, feelings, and ideas. When children can speak clearly and are understood, they feel more confident to participate in play, learning and everyday interactions.

Typical speech development

Between 2 to 3 years old (2;0 to 3;11), children learn to say the following correctly:

- Short sounds – p, b, d, t, k, g
- Long sounds – h, f
- Nasal sounds – m, n, ng
- Other sounds – w, y

By 3 years old, children speaking in short sentences are approximately 68% understandable to a non-familiar person.

By 4 years old (4;0 to 4;11), children learn to say the following correctly:

- Long sounds – s, z, v, sh
- Other sounds – ch, j, l

By 4 years old, children speaking in short sentences are approximately 86% understandable to a non-familiar person.

By 5 years old (5;0 to 5;11), children learn to say the following correctly:

- Long sounds – zh (e.g. treasure), th (e.g. feather)
- Other sounds – r

By 5 years old, children speaking in short sentences are approximately 94% understandable to a non-familiar person.

By 6 years old (6;0 to 6;11), children learn to say the following correctly:

- Long sounds – th (e.g. thumb)

By 6 years old, children speaking in short sentences are approximately 97% understandable to a non-familiar person.

What you might notice if there are difficulties

- Sounds being substituted with other sounds (e.g. sun as tun, bag as bad).
- Sounds or syllables being left off words (e.g. fish as fi).
- Sounds are distorted or sound ‘slushy.’
- Their speech is hard to understand, even for people who know them well.

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How can a speech pathologist help?

Some speech sound differences are a normal part of development and can be expected at certain ages. A speech pathologist can help determine whether your child's speech is developing as expected for their age or if extra support may be helpful.

A speech pathologist can also:

- Assess your child's speech and language skills.
- Target specific speech sounds to improve clarity.
- Use fun, play-based activities to practice sounds.
- Provide strategies to improve communication at home.

What can families do at home?

- Model correct speech sounds and show mouth shape when talking with your child.

- Gently draw attention to their speech (e.g. "I heard tar, did you mean car?")
- Read books, sing songs or practice sounds in fun play activities.
- Give plenty of encouragement and celebrate attempts.
- Avoid repeated requests to say words a certain way (e.g. "say car, not tar"). This can place more pressure on children.

When should you seek support?

If you are worried about your child's speech, have difficulty understanding them or feel they have not met the above milestones, you may need to seek help from a speech pathologist. If you are unsure, it is best to seek guidance from a speech pathologist, rather than to 'wait and see'.

For more information contact Benalla Health on (03) 5761 4500 to speak to a speech pathologist.

References: McLeod, S., & Crowe, K. (2018). Children's Consonant Acquisition in 27 Languages: A Cross-Linguistic Review. *American journal of speech-language pathology*, 27(4), 1546–1571. https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_AJSLP-17-0100 Hustad, K. C., Mahr, T. J., Natzke, P., & Rathouz, P. J. (2021). Speech Development Between 30 and 119 Months in Typical Children I: Intelligibility Growth Curves for Single-Word and Multiword Productions. *Journal of speech, language, and hearing research: JSLHR*, 64(10), 3707–3719. https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_JSLHR-21-00142