



Health Tips for Parents

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Understanding pediatric speech disorders

Speech and sound disorders – difficulties in articulation, language, voice or fluency – affect 8 to 9 percent of children in the U.S.; however, a variety of therapies can help children strengthen their speech/language skills.

Speech development

Children typically start producing sounds (babbling) at around six months of age, and between 10 and 15 months, they form their first words. By age 2, children normally know 50 to 200 words, are 60-percent intelligible when speaking to strangers and use two-word combinations (e.g., “more cookie”). “Around age 3, children should have a 450-word vocabulary, use three-to-five-word phrases, and be able to follow simple directions such as ‘Get your shoes,’” says Lisa Owens, AuD, director of audiology, House Children’s Hearing Center of UCLA.

Diagnosis

Overall, more than half of speech/language disorders have no known cause. In some cases, the child has a known medical condition such as cleft palate, hearing loss or Down syndrome – all of which increase the chance of developing speech and language disorders.

“Hearing loss in particular plays a significant role in speech and language delay,” Owens explains. “When children do not have access to speech in their hearing range, their ability to develop speech and language can be compromised.” Speech disorders have also been tied to learning disorders such as dyslexia and auditory processing disorders, which can hinder academic success.

If your child exhibits delayed speech and language development, it is important to schedule a full hearing examination with your pediatrician. “One in four children will have some degree of hearing loss in their life and nearly 6 percent will be diagnosed with a specific language impairment,” Owens says. From there, a speech-language evaluation with a licensed speech pathologist may be necessary to assess voice, fluency, and speech and language. Los Angeles public schools also offer free evaluation and school-based therapy for children older than 3.

Types of speech disorders

- **Speech articulation:** Omitting/distorting sounds; substituting one sound for another.
- **Voice:** Abnormal vocal skills; changes in voice quality may indicate ongoing disorder.
- **Language:** Affects use or understanding of language; may affect social communication and ability to understand body language.
- **Fluency:** Stuttering or abnormal speech production (common among pre-schoolers); if lasts for more than a few months, it may indicate a more severe, ongoing disorder.



Treatment

Depending on the child’s age and the underlying cause of the impairment, early intervention can be critical to preventing long-standing difficulties with speech and language.

“Children between the ages of 1 and 4 with speech difficulties are often treated through play-based speech therapy,” Owens says. “As they get older, therapy may continue to utilize games, art and music in addition to more structured techniques such as oral-motor assessments, language interventions or speech practice — depending on the type of speech disorder, the cause and the therapist.”