

When should you refer to a Speech Pathologist?

1. Speech sound development:

Some children have difficulty acquiring speech sounds that are appropriate for their age. (NB. Children acquire speech sounds in a particular order and at approximately the same age. However, the speech sounds that a 2½ year old will acquire are different to those expected from a 7½ - 8 yr old child).

As children develop speech sounds the clarity of their speech varies. As a guide, the listener can expect the following:

- By 3 years: familiar people will understand the child
The first sounds children learn for 0 – 3 years; m, n, p, b, t, d, w, y, k, g
- By 3½ – 4 years: people who see the child regularly will understand them
Children learn these sounds in preschool, around 3½ - 4½ years; f, sh, ch, j, l, s, z
- By 4 – 4½ years: unfamiliar listeners should be able to understand the child
The following sounds are developed during school-aged years, around 5 – 8½ years; r, v, th and sound blends (pl, sl, tr, gr etc).

2. Language:

For children who experience difficulty understanding language (e.g. following instructions) or using language (using the correct word or grammar expected for their age). Children first learn to use sounds, then single words, then two word sentences and so on. Sentence length and complexity continue to develop as the child matures. Consider contacting a Speech Pathologist:

- If a child is not babbling or using a variety of sounds by 9 months of age
- If a child is not using single words by 18 months
- If a child is not using 2 word sentences by 2½ years
- If a child is not using correct sentence structure by 4½ years
- If a child is having difficulty understanding what has been said to them or trouble following instructions
- If a child has periods when they do not appear to hear well
- If a child does not understand the rules of simple conversations. E.g. if they do not make any eye contact, or if they are unable to take a short turn in a conversation by 3 years.

3. Stuttering:

Children that have trouble speaking fluently. Types of stutters include:

- Repetitions
 - Single sound eg. 'd-d-d-daddy'
 - Syllables eg. 'ba-ba-baby'
 - Word eg. 'I -I -I want a drink'
 - Phrase eg. 'I want- I want -I want a go'
- Prolongations
 - A sound is stretched out eg. Where's the ca-a-a-a-t?
- Blocking
 - A silence occurs as the person tries to speak ' ___ I want to.'
- Overuse of filler words
 - E.g. "Um"

If you suspect a child is stuttering, do not ignore the stutter and hope that the child will simply 'grow out of it'. If left untreated, stuttering in young children can become established in their speech and persist into adulthood.

Some children do stop stuttering without ever needing therapy from a clinic. However many children will continue to stutter and will require professional help. At present there are no reliable indicators to predict which children will recover without help. Consultation with a speech pathologist is required and recommended.

4. Voice:

Voice difficulties can occur as a result of voice misuse (e.g. yelling, excessive use) or other physical conditions of the vocal area. A voice may sound:

- husky, hoarse or nasal voice
- inappropriately soft or loud voice
- unusually low or high pitch

You should refer a child to a speech pathologist if you have noticed a child's voice quality change over a period of time. A Speech Pathologist can provide education to parents and children about how their voice works and about how to care for the voice. Speech Pathologists also provide treatment to assist children to use their voice in the best possible way.

5. Social Problems:

Children that experience difficulty with the social aspects of language such as; eye contact, taking turns in a conversation and initiating a topic of conversation.

6. Feeding difficulties:

Children need to be able to progress through the stages of feeding development in order to maintain adequate nutrition for their age. Oral movements involved with drinking and eating may be associated with those required for development of speech. You should refer a child to a Speech Pathologist if:

- he/she has ongoing difficulty with breast or bottle-feeding
- If a child is not putting on weight and you have consulted with your early childhood nurse
- If a 9 – 12 month old child is having difficulty progressing from pureed to lumpy foods
- If a 2 year old still has food in their mouth after eating or loses food from their mouth during meal times
- If a 3 year old favours bottle feeding to eating solid foods

Lastly,

When you are unsure of whether to refer, please feel free to call us and ask any questions you may have! Our experience has shown that the earlier a child is referred and treated for a speech or language delay, the quicker the problem is remediate as well as less therapy required in the long term.