

A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a light-colored t-shirt, smiling and looking at a young child. The child is seen from the side, looking back at the man. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. A red graphic element, consisting of two overlapping curved lines, frames the text in the center.

Speech sound development

Speech sound development follows a pattern and children learn to use different speech sounds at different ages. Like many areas of development, some children develop speech sounds more quickly than others.

Most children have most speech sounds by the time they are five years old but can still struggle with sounds such as 'r' and 'th' and longer words like 'binoculars' and 'hospital'.

Children are more at risk of developing speech sound difficulties if:

- there is a family history of speech and language difficulties;
- delayed development or problems with the nerves and muscles that control the mouth, tongue and lips, eg cleft palate, dyspraxia;
- hearing difficulties or lots of ear infections;
- limited opportunities to explore and play with sounds as a baby with babble.

When a child is learning to talk, they have a limited range of sounds and words and parents usually can work out what the child is saying. As

children get older, their vocabulary increases and they begin to use sentences. During this time, it can get more difficult to understand what they are saying. Most parents can understand what their own child is saying but often have to 'translate' for other people to understand.

It's normal for children to use sounds in some words but not in others. This is due to the pattern of development, for example a child may be able to say 's' at the end of 'bus' but not in 'sun'.

Some parents can feel that their children are being lazy in their speech. This is very rare. Most children want to be understood and find ways of making themselves understood.

How to help speech sound development

- Be **face to face** when talking with your child. This allows your child to see your mouth and how you are making sounds. It's also easier to hear someone when they are facing you.

- If you understand what your child has said, **just repeat back the words**, saying it as if the child had said it with all the correct sounds.
- If you don't understand, repeat any words you did understand and ask if your child can tell you any more. This will encourage your child to rephrase what he/she said or show you what was being talked about.
- **Try not to make your child repeat words or sounds.** This can affect confidence in speaking. It's better to let your child listen to you saying the word again and give praise if he/she has a go.
- **Get your child's attention** and eye contact before speaking.
- **Use repetition** so your child hears a sound lots of times.
- Play games that help **develop listening skills** such as sound lotto games, or listen to what you can hear when you are out or in the house. Encourage your child to notice sounds.
- **Background noise** can make hearing speech sounds more difficult. Try to limit this when your child is talking or listening.

Common simplifications that children use in speech

Age	Simplification	Example
2-2½ years	Ends missed off words Back sounds (k/g) not used Long sounds (f/s) not used	Bus – 'bu' Car – 'tar' Sun – 'dun'
2½-3½ years	Back sounds appear Long sounds appear end sounds are used blends (sp/sk/pl/cr/fl/br) not used	Spoon – 'boon' Drink – 'dink'
3½-4 years	Blends appear 'sh', 'ch' and 'j' simplified	Chip – 'tsip'

At four to five children still simplify 'th' and 'r' but can use most sounds and can be understood by most people.

You may want to talk to someone if:

- you want to know more about speech sound development and how to help;
- your child is difficult to understand at three-and-a-half to four years old;
- they have a history of hearing difficulties;
- there is a family history of speech and language difficulties.

For advice or more information, please contact the Early Communication Team through your local children's centre.

Childrens centre details

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