

6 minute read

# What affects the pace of progress in speech therapy?

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If there was one question that I wish I had a crystal ball to answer for the clients and families I work with, it would hands-down be: "How long will speech therapy take?" I'll go ahead and rip this band-aid off—there is no one single answer. I know it can be frustrating to hear, but let's dive in and talk about why this is and what factors DO contribute to faster progress.

First, it's helpful to understand how speech therapists measure a person's improvement over time, especially when it's tough to predict a concrete timeline. Speech therapists evaluate the person's areas of strength, and areas in need of support, in order to create an individualized plan of care. That plan is made up of short-term goals that feed into long-term goals—which are the ultimate, functional outcomes that we're aiming to help our clients achieve.

When designing and measuring goals, we also consider the level of support that a person may need to reach them. For example, does a child need visual reminders to correctly produce their L sound in sentences? Perhaps they can already pronounce L at the word-level, and they don't need support there. But... when they're ready to move on to reading and conversation-levels, they might need visual AND verbal reminders to remain accurate.

Improvements in speech and language therapy require small steps on the climb to big change. Imagine a ladder where the first rung is higher than your fingertips can reach, and there are big gaps between each rung. That ladder won't do you much good, especially when you can't even begin to climb. Now imagine a ladder where the first rung is right at your knees, and there are more rungs with smaller gaps in between. That ladder will be much easier to climb, and you'll probably get to the top faster! Speech therapy goals are much the same.

Now let's talk about the other factors that can impact the pace of progress. They include motivation, caregiver participation, and home practice.

1

It's important for the person receiving speech therapy to stay motivated. For children, especially very young ones, that motivation may look more like enjoyment. Therapy activities are likely to be play-based and child-led, so the speech therapist can have the child's enthusiastic participation.

For older children, teens, and adults, motivation can start to take the form of conversations about real-world impacts. What are they hoping to achieve in speech therapy? What do they look forward to doing independently? When a speech therapist understands those motivating factors, it can help drive therapy activities and the person's desire to succeed.

2

If you're the caregiver of a child receiving speech therapy, the next big influence on how quickly they progress is something quite familiar to you. That's because it's, well—you! Research has shown that when parents and caregivers participate in their child's therapy, it supports stronger and faster outcomes for speech and language goals. It hopefully makes sense if I put it like this: communication is all around us, and you likely communicate with your child more than anyone else does. So, if our goal is to practice a communication skill in order to improve, then who better to help a child with that than their parent or caregiver?

But don't worry—you're not doing it alone. Your speech therapist is there to build the skills in therapy sessions, so you can help your child carry those skills over into their everyday life—which is the real goal!

3

That leads us to our last important factor for progress: home practice. No need for me to get fancy here, I'll give a simple analogy. If you're trying out for the basketball team, you probably aren't practicing your jump shot just once a week for 30 minutes. You're likely on the court or in the driveway every day, for at least a few minutes, shooting free throws and lay-ups, practicing your three-pointers from here, and there, and way over there, too.

Speech and language therapy is for developing or regaining communication skills, and that takes practice, as well. Your speech therapist will explain what you should practice throughout the week to make faster progress toward your goals. Don't take for granted the impact of even a few minutes of practice per day!

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So, although your speech therapist won't be pulling out a crystal ball anytime soon, as therapy goes on, they can track the pace of growth and change and begin to see a clearer picture of the overall timeline. Motivation, caregiver participation, and home practice are three key factors in helping your progress be the very best it can be!