

When Should You Consider Speech Therapy for Your Child?



When it comes to a child's speech and language development, there's one question that all parents have asked themselves at some point: "What's normal?"

Children don't come with a guidebook. It becomes difficult to assess whether they are achieving appropriate milestones, whether they require the assistance of a speech therapist, and when to initiate such support.

Communication issues such as speech errors, slight stuttering, and lack of comprehension are common in nearly all developing children. During a child's early years, their brains undergo rapid growth as they acquire language skills and comprehend the world around them.

So, how can we differentiate between minor issues and more significant problems? Will these speech errors naturally resolve over time, or do they require intervention? What is considered typical for children of similar age? Let's explore these questions further.

I. What are speech and language problems?

While speech and language difficulties frequently overlap, it is crucial to differentiate between the two. The first step in recognizing speech or language impairments is understanding the difference.

Speech involves how children verbalize and articulate their communication. Children facing speech challenges may struggle with pronouncing specific sounds and letters, such as /s/ or /z/. They may have a hard time forming these sounds into intelligible sentences, and expressing their thoughts and opinions.

Speech delay, for example, is a common problem in young children. It's defined as not hitting certain developmental milestones expected for that age. This can be caused by a number of factors, including oral-motor problems such as trouble coordinating tongue, lip, and mouth movements needed to make sounds properly.

Stuttering is another example that affects millions of people. Stuttering is characterized by the disruption of speech due to the prolongation, repetition, or sudden stoppages of sounds.

Language disorders, on the other hand, affect how a person processes, interprets, and understands both verbal and nonverbal communication. Unlike speech problems, a child with a language disorder may pronounce words perfectly. However, in many cases they have a hard time organizing words together into sentences. They may struggle to learn and use new vocabulary or tell stories (expressive language disorder). Or they may have trouble understanding what someone is trying to communicate, defining words, or comprehending written text (receptive language disorder).

II. Typical speech and language milestones

Every child follows their own developmental timeline. Some children are simply late talkers and will soon be rattling off a million words a minute. Others may show normal signs of speech and language progression and then suddenly hit a plateau or develop a stutter.

Regardless, there are certain milestones that children should meet within an expected age range.

3–12 months

Communication extends far beyond verbal utterances. We use nonverbal communication everyday, such as **gestures** and facial expressions, to express our thoughts and feelings. Even before toddlers say their first words, they should be smiling, making eye contact, responding to social cues, babbling, painting, waving, playing, gesturing, etc.

By 12 months old, children also begin to experiment with speech. They may try to imitate your sounds, say simple words like “mama,” and begin to make associations between objects and their names.

If you notice your child isn't interacting with people at all, or is generally unresponsive, it's a good idea to seek professional help from a speech therapist.

12–18 months

At this age, children generally begin saying their first intelligible words. While their vocabulary will still be limited, they should be growing in their ability to use and understand verbal and nonverbal communication. They should also begin to understand and follow simple

	directions and recognize common names, items, and body parts.
24 months	<p>By 2 years old, children's speech and language should have rapidly progressed. They should not only have said their first words, but know as many as 50 words or more. In addition, children should begin to string these words together into simple phrases and questions, such as "milk please" or "bye-bye now?"</p> <p>This is also the age where independent and spontaneous vocalizations become noticeable. In other words, they're not just imitating or repeating your words, but expressing themselves on their own. While children this age won't be understood 100% of the time, as a rule of thumb they should generally be speaking well enough to be understood by you and immediate family members at least 50% of the time.</p>
Beyond 24 months	<p>At this point, whether your child has a speech or language impairment becomes quite apparent. Some red flags can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Limited vocabulary; isn't saying many wordsInability to put words together and create simple phrases or sentencesNot being understood at least 75% of the timeLow levels of interactions (for example, not pointing when asked or answering questions)Not understanding simple instructions and directionsContinuing to mispronounce vowels or rarely using consonants

III. When should children correctly pronounce sounds?

There are many **sounds** and letters in the English language that children master over time. It's important to observe not only what your child is trying to say, but *how* they're saying it. Mispronunciations of expected sounds by different ages can be another sign that your child would benefit from speech therapy.

While all children develop at their own pace, below are certain sounds that most English-speaking children should be using correctly.

By 3 months: Your child has started making cooing sounds

By 5 months: Laughs and makes playful sounds

By 6 months: Makes speech-like babbling sounds like puh, ba, mi, da

By 1 year: Starts putting sounds together to say things like mimi, upup, bababa

By 3 years: Can use the following sounds well in words: /m/, /n/, /h/, /w/, /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, and /f/

By 4 years: Uses the following sounds in words: /y/ and /v/

By 6 years: Uses the following sounds in words: /l/, /sh/, /ch/, and /j/

By 8 years: Can correctly use all sounds, including those more difficult to pronounce, such as /r/, /s/, /z/, and /th/

IV. Early intervention can lead to better outcomes

The way children communicate has an impact on various aspects of their lives, including their ability to express themselves, understand others, succeed academically, stay motivated and confident, and maintain good mental health and social connections. As a result, it is crucial for parents and caregivers to closely observe their child's communication strengths and barriers. While adopting a "watch and wait" approach might be appropriate for certain children in specific situations, it also carries the risk of delaying necessary treatment. The more time a child spends using incorrect speech and language patterns, the longer it may take to rectify the issues, and the more significant the negative effects on the child's overall well-being.

If you observe that your child is facing difficulties in communication or if speech errors are impacting their daily life and interactions, it is advisable to seek a comprehensive evaluation from a certified speech-language pathologist. These professionals specialize in communication and can provide a clinical recommendation regarding whether and when your child should begin therapy.

There's no simple formula for determining exactly when a child should start speech therapy. What's important is that you watch for any potential issues, speak regularly with specialists, and if necessary, seek an evaluation from a speech therapist. Generally, the earlier you can intervene and start working on strategies to fix or compensate for your child's communication challenges, the more progress your child will make.

Free Phone Consultation

To schedule your free phone consultation, please contact our clinic at 04 - 570 5837 or call/WhatsApp at 052 514 2411.

We offer free Speech and ABA screenings in affiliation with our partner schools. Contact us to know if your child is eligible.