

Speech Sounds

What are Speech Sounds?

Speech sounds refer to the individual units of sound we use to form words. Sound is made when air passes from the lungs to the vocal cords causing them to vibrate. The tongue, teeth, lips and mouth muscles are then used to shape the air to create different sounds.

Speech Sound Development

Not all speech sounds are expected to develop at the same time. The age of acquisition for speech sounds differs dependent on the target sound. For example, the /w/ sound (age of acquisition is 3) is expected to develop before the /r/ sound (age of acquisition is 5).

The below table indicates the expected age of acquisition for consonant sounds. This should be used only as a guide, as all children are unique and develop skills at their own pace.

Age of Acquisition	Speech Sounds
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: p, b, t, d, m, n, ng, y, w, h ~75% of speech can be understood
3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: k, g, f
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: sh, ch, l
4.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: s, z, j
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: r Many consonant sounds used consistently and accurately, though may not be mastered in all contexts
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: v Speech is 100% intelligible
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consonants mastered: voiced and voiceless 'th'

Bowen, C. (2011). Table 4: Phonetic Development. Retrieved from <http://www.speech-language-therapy.com>.

Each individual speech sound follows the below hierarchy of development:

1. Mastered production of sound in isolation (e.g., /k/)
2. Mastered production of sound attached to vowel (e.g., /k-ah/, /k-oh/, /k-ee/ etc)
3. Mastered production of sound at word level in all word positions – initial, medial and final (e.g., /car/, /bacon/, /sock/)
4. Mastered production of sound at sentence level in all word positions – initial, medial and final
5. Mastered production of sound at conversational level in all word positions – initial, medial and final

Strategies to Support Speech Sound Development

- Focus on what your child says, not how they say it. Your child may not be aware that they are mispronouncing words.
- Repeat the mispronounced word back to your child so they can hear a correct model of it. This reinforces correct speech sound production without making the child feel criticised. For example; Child – “look a mato”, Adult – “that’s right it’s a tomato”.
- Practice speech sounds face to face so your child can watch how your tongue, lips and mouth move to make the sound correctly.
- Use specific positive praise with your child (e.g., “wow I heard you make a great s sound!”) to support them to identify exactly what they did well.

Speech Sounds

Try to avoid:

- Asking for several repetitions of the mispronounced word
- Focusing on the speech sound errors your child makes.
- Pretending that you have understood your child. If you are unsure of what they have said then ask them to show you.
- Saying that you did not understand your child or that they did not say the word properly

Activities to Target Speech Sounds:

- Turn Taking/Board Games

Before each person takes their turn, they must practice saying the target sound/word when presented a picture card.

- Memory Game

Play a classic game of 'memory' with your child, with a speech sound twist. Create cards with pictures of objects that represent target speech sound (e.g., "cat" "cow", "candle" etc for target /k/). Shuffle the cards and lay them face down. Take turns flipping over two cards at a time, trying to match pairs of objects that have the same sound. As you play, say the word aloud.

- Puzzles

Each person takes turns saying the target sound/word when presented with a picture card. Once they state the target, they are provided a piece of the puzzle to put together.

- Bean Bag Toss:

Place cards containing target sounds/words on the floor. Have your child gently throw the beanbag onto one of the target pictures. When the beanbag lands on a picture card, your child must then say the target sound/word on the displayed picture card.

- Sensory Bin:

Place cards containing target sound/words in a container filled with tactile items (e.g., cotton balls, pom poms, buttons, feathers, sand, shells etc - anything you can think of). As they pull each target out get your child to say the word aloud.

- I Spy

Each person is to take turns spotting things in the environment that begin with the target sound. For example: "let's take turns finding items that start with the letter /l/. I will go first.. I spy a light". Your child would then respond with "I spy....". and so forth.

- Pictionary

Place cards containing target words face down. Choose a card and begin to draw the target - see if they can guess what the target is. You can turn take during this game to make it more engaging.