

Speech sound difficulties: Key facts

What do we mean by 'Intelligible' speech?

'Clear' speech that is easily understood by the listener. Broadly speaking, unfamiliar adults should be able to understand a child as follows:

- Child aged 1 year = 25% of the time
- Child aged 2 years = 50% of the time
- Child aged 3 years = 75% of the time
- Child aged 4 years = 100% of the time



What speech sound difficulties might you see in the classroom?

- **Articulation difficulties:** Difficulty bringing the articulators (tongue, lips, palate, teeth...) together in a way that produces a clear and correct sound. The child will be able to say less individual sounds than expected (see table below).
- **Phonological difficulties:** even though they can articulate the sound by itself, they are not using the right sound in the right place in a word e.g. 'key' articulated as 'tea'
- **Articulation and Phonological difficulties:** a mixture of both of the above.

What speech sounds should children be able to say and use correctly?

It's common for younger children to make mistakes with pronunciation. This chart can help you to identify the speech sounds expected at various ages. From this, you can get a rough idea of what to expect and whether referral to a Speech Therapist is needed.

Age	Sounds that should be developing
1 ½ - 2 years	m, n, p, b, t, d
2½ - 3 years	f, s, w, y, h
3-4 years	k, g, v
4-5 years	z, sh, ch, j, l Simple blends e.g. 'sp', 'st',
5 – 7 years	r, th Tricker blends e.g. 'bl', 'cr'

Speech sound difficulties: Top Tips

Model the sound rather than correct (don't ask them to repeat)

When working with children with speech sound difficulties it's important to focus on modeling rather than correcting their speech. Repeat sounds back to them naturally with **emphasis** on the sound they said wrong. Imagine how exhausting it would be if someone asked you to repeat a sound you find difficult every time you get it wrong; it is likely to affect your confidence around speaking which is what we want to avoid.



Build self esteem

React to what the child says; not how clearly they say it. If you understand part of what they say then focus on this to show they have been successful in expressing themselves. Use strategies such as home school diaries to give some context to your conversations as this can make interactions more successful. Always praise the child for trying.

Work on sounds in stages

When working on speech sounds – don't jump in with full sentences! Start with the sound in isolation (e.g. K). Next, add a vowel either before or after the target sound (e.g. Kar or eek). Next try a CVC word (e.g. Cat) Then a short phrase (e.g. Brown Cat). Move on to the next stage when they are 80% accurate at a previous stage. You can then move onto sentences and correcting spontaneous speech during a set period of the day, such as when they're reading.

Practice little and often

You will see improvements much quicker if you practice regularly, daily if possible. This is why it is so important for therapist, school and home to work together as you are not likely to see improvements with only weekly SALT sessions.

Make Practice fun

Nobody wants to practice something they find tricky every day! So use games to make it fun (see handout 'Speech sound difficulties: Therapy practice ideas' for more ideas) and always start and end a session with something the child can do well.

