

# A parent's guide to... speech

How does a child move from babbling to mastering the sounds and sequences of a language? *Penny Tassoni* explains the process



It takes most children four or so years to master talking. One of the important parts of learning to talk is the ability to make the sounds that form words. This starts in the first year of life and continues for up to seven years.

Here, we offer some advice about a child's journey from babbling to talking clearly.

## **FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TALKING**

### **1. 'Speech' has a particular meaning**

While most people use the words 'speech', 'talk' and 'language' interchangeably, the term 'speech' actually relates to the sounds that children are able to make when talking. Interestingly, the number of

sounds that are needed to speak a language varies. English has more than 40 different sounds.

### **2. Recognising sounds begins before birth**

Before being able to produce sounds, babies have to learn them. It may come as a surprise, but babies are able to recognise certain voices, especially their mother's, before they are born. Newborn babies are also able to distinguish between languages and show a marked preference for the language that their mother has been using.

### **3. Young babies make the same sounds**

For the first few months, babies make similar sounds, regardless

of what languages they are being exposed to. This means a baby in Beijing sounds pretty much like a baby in Brixton. From about nine months onwards, babies start to reduce the number of sounds that they use as they tune into the language being used with them.

### **4. Babies are programmed to master the sounds of any language**

One of the interesting things about how children learn to talk is the ability of babies and young children to reproduce all the sounds that are needed in any language. This means that no language is too hard for them to master in the first few years of childhood. It is a good reason for bilingual families to share their languages with their children.

### **5. Babies and children learn the sounds of English in a particular sequence**

The sequence by which babies and children develop the sounds of English is linked to the development of the tongue and muscles and also the arrival of teeth.

At first, all babies the world over babble using vowels and then other sounds including 'd' and 'm'. One of the latest sounds in English that a child can say is the 'r', as in rabbit, which children often say as 'wabbit' for quite a while.

## **SEQUENCE OF SOUNDS**

The list below is a guide to the usual sequences by which children start to produce sounds. But remember that some children will be faster, and others slower, in learning to speak. If you are unsure about your child's speech, talk to your child's nursery or your GP, or contact your local speech and language team directly.

**Up until 18 months** A child increasingly combines vowel sounds

(a, e, i, o, u) with an easily produced consonant – for dada, baba, mama.

**18 months to two years** Children make a limited number of sounds, including p, b, t, d, m and w.

**Two to three years** This age group uses an increasing number of sounds. They will often shorten long words and substitute a sound – for example, ‘nana’ instead of banana or ‘cocoli’ instead of broccoli. They may still find it difficult to produce the following sounds: ‘sh’, ‘ch’, ‘th’ and ‘r.’ At three years, most children can be understood by people who do not know them well.

**Three to four years** Children find it easier to speak clearly and produce most of the sounds in words. They may still have difficulty with more complex sounds such as example ‘th’, ‘sh’, ‘ch’ and ‘z’. Other sounds that may come in later include: ‘r’, ‘w’, ‘l’, ‘f’.

**Four to five years** Children can produce sounds clearly, although ‘r’ and ‘w’ may still not be accurate. They may find it hard to produce some more complex words, such as ‘scribble’, which combine sounds.

## WHY HEARING IS SO VITAL

To make sounds accurately, children do need to be able to hear well.

Unfortunately, many young children



are prone to ‘glue ear’ – where a sticky fluid collects in the eustachian tube, which runs from the outer ear to the ear drum.

Children with glue ear will hear distorted sounds – a little like having your head under water. It is more common after children have had colds and in the winter months. The amount of fluid in the ear can vary, so at times children will hear well while at others they may be more blocked up.

Signs include muffled speech, loud talk, your child not always immediately responding to you, or needing to have volume turned high on the television. If you think that your child is showing these signs, talk to your GP.

## FIVE TIPS TO HELP SPEECH

### 1. Reduce background noise

To produce sounds accurately, children do need to notice them. Too much background noise can prevent babies and young children from hearing spoken sounds, as they can find it hard to tune in to one source of sound. While many of us put on the television or radio in the background out of habit or for company, try to have times when there is little background noise.

### 2. Limit the use of dummies

Dummies are recommended for the first year of a child’s life when they are sleeping. This helps their airways remain open and so is thought to help reduce the risk of cot death. However, dummies are not helpful when babies and toddlers are trying to talk. They can prevent the tongue from touching the teeth – an important movement when producing sounds such as ‘t’ and ‘n’.

If your child is under 12 months, aim to keep the dummy only for bedtime and naps. If you have an older child who still uses a dummy, introduce an alternative soother, such as a cuddly toy, and gradually restrict access to the dummy.

### 3. Get close up

To learn to talk well, babies and children need to hear us talking clearly and watch our mouth movements. Look out for times when you and your child can snuggle up and chat, sing and play. During this time, your child can concentrate on your voice and the sounds within it. Your voice is likely to be more tuneful when you are relaxed and so easier for your child to focus on. ➤



### 4. Model, but don't correct

When learning to use speech sounds, toddlers and children will make incorrect sounds. There are several reasons why this might occur. Your child may not have developed their muscles or teeth yet or may need more time to hear the sound. If this happens, avoid correcting your child, as this can make them lose confidence. Instead, repeat what your child has said correctly and clearly. Over time, your child should hear the sounds and go on to say them.

### 5. Protect your child's teeth

Our teeth play an important part in speech and many sounds depend on having teeth in place. It is vital then to ensure babies and children have healthy gums and teeth. Sugary and/or acidic drinks, including juices and flavoured water, can cause problems, so the best bet is to give your child only water between meals. Young children are also not able to clean their teeth properly, so this is a job for grown-ups.

### COMMON PROBLEMS

**Q. I understand my three-year-old, but her nursery says her speech is unclear.**

**A.** Parents and family members can often understand their children, but it is important that from age three onwards other people and children can too. There are a range of reasons why your child's speech might not be clear, but it will be worth having this checked out.

**Q. My four-year-old is talking more, but his speech is less clear than before.**

**A.** This is not unusual. When



children begin to use longer words and more complex sentences, they often struggle to say all the sounds in sequence. You are likely to find that over the next few weeks, his speech will become clearer. If not, there is no harm in asking for a referral.

### ACTIVITIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD'S SPEECH

Choose a time when your child is relaxed. Some activities are very useful to try out with your child before they start school, as hearing and making speech sounds links to early reading.

#### Rhyme time

Nursery rhymes are one of the best ways of helping children develop strong speech. Firstly, they tend to help us to speak clearly and we become good models. They also help children to hear patterns in words and particular sounds.



Look out for rhymes that have words starting with the same sound – for example, Five Little Peas in a Pea Pod Pressed. Rhymes that have strong final sounds are also great fun – like the 'ck' in Hickory Dickory Dock. Don't worry if your child can't say all the sounds. The starting point is for them to hear the sounds.

#### Rattles and shakers

The use of rattles and shakers can help children to listen out for sounds. You can play games when you both rattle or shake in time to music. Or take it in turns to play one shaker and get your child to guess which one you used.

#### I Spy

I Spy is great at helping children to notice sounds and worth playing with children of three onwards.

As sounds of speech and the alphabet are different, start by using speech sounds and giving your child an example – 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with "a", as in apple'. Start to use letter sounds around the time your child starts Reception. ■