

Does My Child Have A Speech & Language Disorder?

By Pamela Thomas Joseph, SLP, member of MASH

Introduction

No time of life is as full of development and growth as the period BETWEEN birth to age 6. It seems like almost magic for parents to observe their children grow, change and learn. Some children acquire speech and language as easily as fish learn to swim. Others may experience greater challenges.

Parents are often the first adults to notice a possible delay in their child's speech or language development. It must be remembered that speech skills are entirely different from language skills. Language refers to the use of words and sentences to convey ideas. Speech on the other hand is the production of sounds that make up words and sentences. A child may have problem in either one or both of these components of his development.

You may find it helpful to use developmental milestones such as those listed below to help compare their child's development with that of other children of the same age. This will help you gauge your child's communicative skills. We must exercise caution when measuring the development of your child as individual differences and special circumstances must be accounted for.

General milestones for speech and language development suggest that:

- **At one year old**, children should be able to understand a variety of words and should be using a few single words
- **At age 2**, words should be combined into two and three-word phrases and sentences.

- **Between the ages of 3 and 5**, children learn to carry on a conversation, ask and answer questions, follow and give directions, and speak alone in the presence of a group. These skills are important to help the child succeed in kindergarten.
- As a rule, children should use understandable speech by age 4 and use all speech sounds correctly by ages 5 and 7.

At what point should I be concerned about my child's development?

It is inevitable that in most societies, social and communicative success depends on well-developed speech and language skills. As parents, we may want to start seeking guidance when we notice some of the following.

At age 3	At age 4	At age 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Says only one or two words at a time • Cannot answer "what" or "who" questions • Has incomprehensible speech except when she speaks within context • Does not seem to hear or understand all that is said or seems to "tune-out" what others are saying • Does not start conversations and speaks only when spoken to. • Does not understand spoken directions without visual assistance from pointing and other gestures. • Repeats what others say rather than responding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks in only 2 or 3 word phrases and his word order is very poor • Cannot answer simple "what", "where" or "why" questions • exhibits frequent jumbled up sentences • does not talk to peers or adults unless prodded, and then talks as little as possible. • Does not respond to simple two-step directions e.g. "go to the kitchen and bring mummy a spoon." • Cannot listen to two or three lines of a story and answer simple questions about what was read. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks only in 3 or 4 word sentences about present events. • Is unable to answer questions about "yesterday" and "tomorrow" as well as "how" questions. • Shows poor clarity of speech. • Talks a great deal but his remarks may not be relevant to the context. • Has trouble sitting and listening to a story of more than four or five sentences without "tuning out".

Other qualities of speech and language which require your attention include:

- If your child is noticeably stammering after the age of 5.
- If your child is embarrassed and disturbed by his speech.
- If your child has a voice that is monotone, too loud or too soft.
- If your child's voice quality is too high or too low for his age and gender.
- If your child sounds as if he is talking through his nose or as if he has a cold.
- If your child's speech has an abnormal rhythm and rate

What can I do if I suspect a difficulty?

If you notice any of these problems, you may want to have your child's speech and language skills evaluated by a qualified speech-language pathologist (SLP). An assessment is a complete evaluation of the speech and language skills that your child has acquired and other necessary areas. This will help determine his strengths and subsequent needs, if any.

A general rule of thumb is to consult a speech-language pathologist when you are in doubt. By doing so, parents benefit greatly. Firstly because an evaluation may alleviate unnecessary worry and uncertainty that the parent may otherwise shoulder for a very long period. Secondly, early identification can help him receive help when he is still trainable.

A list of qualified Speech & Language Pathologists and Audiologists in the country can be obtained from the Malaysian Association of Speech and Hearing.

(See LINKS on home page)

