

Factsheet

Speech Sounds

How do children learn different sounds?

Children learn sounds by listening to people speaking around them. They have been tuning into the sounds around them since before they were born and they carry on developing their ability to tune into environmental sounds and speech sounds. Babies begin by playing with sounds first of all, then babble. This babble develops into longer strings using a wider range of sounds.

At what ages do children learn different sounds?

As children are learning to talk, their sound system develops gradually. This means that they cannot say all their sounds straight away, as some are later to develop than others. As a general guide, the table below shows the ages sounds develop by (this guideline is for children who speak English as their home language).

Approximate age	Usually children will:
18-24 months	Use a limited number of sounds in their words – often these are p, b, t, d, m and w. Children will also often miss the ends off words at this stage. They can usually be understood about half of the time.

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2-3 years	<p>Use a wider range of speech sounds. However, many children will shorten longer words, such as saying 'nana' instead of 'banana'. They may also have difficulty where lots of sounds happen together in a word, e.g. they may say 'pider' instead of 'spider.'</p> <p>They often have problems saying more difficult sounds like 'sh', 'ch', 'th' and 'r.' However, people that know them can mostly understand them.</p>
3-4 years	<p>Have difficulties with a small number of sounds – for example 'r', 'w', 'l', 'f', 'th', 'sh', 'ch' and 'z'.</p>
4-5 years	<p>Use most sounds effectively. However, they may have some difficulties with more difficult words such as 'scribble' or 'elephant'.</p>

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Parent/carers can understand everything the child says but she has just started at nursery and staff can't understand what she's saying.

Parents are often more tuned in to what their child is saying and other people who don't know them can find it difficult to understand. As a rough guide people who don't know a child as well as parents do should be able to understand about 50% of what a child says when they're 2 years old, 90% at age 3, and everything they say by the time they are 3 and a half. If you are worried at all you can go to the Progress Checker at www.talkingpoint.org.uk and see how the child is doing.

Why are they difficult to understand?

Children's ability to say different sounds develops as part of their talking in general. To make it easier for them to say words they may substitute sounds e.g. a 'b' or a 'd' for 'f' or 's' sounds. This is because these sounds are easier to say than 's' or 'f' but it can mean that you can't quite understand everything they say. Sometimes children also miss the beginning or end of words and reduce sound combinations such as 'sp' in spoon to 'poon' or 'boon'.

When should you be worried?

Children develop speech sounds at different rates and you can find out more by going to www.talkingpoint.org.uk. You can also see how the child is doing using the Progress Checker. You may need to talk to someone if they aren't doing what would be expected for their age.

If you or parents are finding the child hard to understand or are worried about their pronunciation, try to see if there are any particular sounds they find hard. Are these at the beginning, end or in the middle of words?

What can affect a child's ability to pronounce sounds?

There are lots of reasons a child may not be able to say certain sounds; a common one is having lots of ear infections and colds. If you think this is happening you can ask the parent to follow this up with their GP.

A child's phonological awareness may also affect their ability to say sounds. Phonological awareness involves knowing how words work – it is things like being able to hear the differences between sounds in words. For example, being able to tell the difference between 'bee' and 'sea' or 'key' and 'tea' when they hear the words; being able to hear when words rhyme; recognising the first sound of a word (e.g. cat begins with 'c') and knowing the sounds that make up words (e.g. cat is made up of c-a-t).

Is there another reason why a child can be difficult to understand?

Sometimes children can struggle to master the sounds we expect from them at the right age i.e. this part of their development is a little delayed. This means they can sound like a child younger than them, or their speech can be unclear. Often children will catch up with a little support or practice, but sometimes their difficulties can be longer lasting.

What can I do to help?

You can try some activities to help children's ability to hear rhymes and how words are made up. These skills can be linked to a child's ability to tell the differences between sounds, and how to say them.

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- Singing nursery rhymes
- Making up silly rhymes e.g. 'the cat has a hat'
- clapping out syllables e.g. 'di-no-saur'

You can also try the following tips to help them:

- Try not to distort the sound or word by over-emphasising it. It is better to draw the sound or word to the child's attention by saying it repeatedly e.g. 'that was a good kick, a really good kick'.
- Model tricky sounds back to them. So if they substitute 'k' for 't' and they say 'tat' you model back 'yes, it's a cat' without any pressure for them to repeat it back for you.
- Play games like 'I spy' focusing on words that begin with the sounds they are having difficulty with. Make sure you also include the sound they are substituting the correct one with – for example, if a child substitutes 'f' with 'p', play the game focusing on 'f' and 'p' words. The aim behind this is to draw their attention to the differences between the sounds. It will also let you know that they are hearing the difference.
- Make up some 'silly sound books' including pictures that begin with the sounds they are having difficulty with. This draws on the same idea that we are raising their awareness of the differences between the sounds without asking them to make the sounds, as they find this tricky.
- Model making tricky sounds in front of a mirror. Can they copy you? Make it fun and avoid drawing too much attention to this if a child is very aware of their difficulty. You could also talk about how you are making the sounds e.g. 'I'm putting my tongue up at the back of my mouth' (for 'k').

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