

Help Your Child Learn to Speak Clearly

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Parents play a key role in the development of their child's speech and language skills. Many parents want to help their child but are not sure exactly what to do. One of the most common questions parents ask speech and language professionals is:

How can I help my child to learn to speak clearly?

1. Expect errors.

All children, and adults too, make some errors in *articulation*—how they make speech sounds. In fact, children normally take seven to eight years to learn to say all of our English sounds correctly!

2. Honesty pays.

Be honest when you do not understand what your child says. Admit that you do not understand. Ask the child to tell you again. Or say, "Show me what you are talking about."

Don't pretend that you understand by saying, "That's nice" or "Yes, that's right." You won't be fooling anyone! Your child will probably think that you are just not interested. Your child may stop talking to you, become angry, or cry.

When you understand part of your child's remark, let the child know. For example, "You are talking about the dog. What did she do?"

3. Be a good listener.

Listen to what your child is trying to tell you, not how it is said. Ignore your child's errors. Correcting errors, instead of responding to the message, can undermine your child's confidence as a speaker.

To improve, your child must keep talking! If you constantly correct pronunciation errors, your child may begin to speak less and less. As a general rule, never force your child to repeat a remark you have understood. You want talking to be a good experience.

4. Ignore mistakes.

When people laugh at pronunciation errors, your child feels angry and frustrated. Teasing hurts a child's feelings and never improves speech. Ask

family members to be kind and ignore your child's mistakes. Don't imitate the child's "baby talk." Use correct speech that your child can imitate.

5. Model good speech.

When your child makes errors, repeat the child's message correctly. But don't ask the child to repeat after you. Children learn by listening. They need to listen to good speech. For example, your child might say, "I tan't fit dis wid" for "I can't fix this lid." You could repeat and *model* as follows: "You can't fix this lid? Maybe I can fix it." You are providing a model of correct speech for your child to hear and imitate. Speak clearly and slowly.

Your examples or models of correct speech help your child in two ways. First, your child knows that you understood. Your child feels successful because you "got the message." Second, your correct speech helps your child learn to speak more clearly. You have not criticized your child or called attention to errors. Yet you have given the child a chance to hear correct speech.

In time, your child will probably begin to correct errors by repeating back your models. Self-correction will be spontaneous, not forced by your demands to "say it" again and again.

6. Fight ear infections.

Good hearing is necessary for the development of normal articulation. Ear infections can cause hearing losses. Children learn language by hearing it. If your child has even mild or temporary hearing losses during the preschool years, speech and language development may be delayed.

Tugging on the ears, congestion, runny nose, or turning up the TV volume are signs of a possible ear infection. Children do not always tell you when they have ear problems. Sometimes they don't even run a fever. When you suspect that your child has an ear infection or that the child's ears are "plugged," see your family physician.

Even mild hearing losses may prevent children from hearing the difference between certain *consonant* sounds. This makes many different words sound the same. For example, a child with

hearing problems may hear "beat," "be," "bean," "beef," "bead," "beep," "beast," and "beak" as the same word!

It is very important to talk clearly and use simple, short sentences when you suspect your child is having hearing problems. Get your child's attention before you speak. Minimize distractions and background noise including radio and television.

7. Be a "good speech" partner

Many parents worry about their child learning incorrect speech by listening to a friend or family member with a speech problem. But when most of the child's speaking partners use normal speech, the child usually develops normal speech, too.

You do need to be concerned and take action when your child hears many poor speakers. Try to increase the amount of time your child hears "good speech." Perhaps you can spend more time with your child. Or, you may just do more talking when you are together. You may not be able to keep your child from hearing poor speakers. But you can increase your child's time spent with good speakers.

Vocabulary

Articulation—The production of speech sounds.

Consonants—The sounds made by stopping or restricting the outgoing breath.

Model—To provide an example of good speech or other behavior; to demonstrate a desired response.

For more information:

Pushaw, David R. 1976. *Teach your child to talk*. New York, NY: Dantree Press.

Refer to:

- 2.2 Speech Development
- 6.2.1 Reasons for Delayed Speech Development
- 6.2.3 Learning Speech Sounds Through Listening
- 6.2.4 Help Your Child Learn Speech Sounds at Home
- 10.2.4 Otitis Media and Speech and Language Development