

What is a Speech Problem?

A guide for parents and carers

A speech problem is an abnormal way of articulating or producing speech sounds. By the way, what are speech sounds? As one mother asked!

We know there are many kinds of sounds. Some are created by musical instruments such as drums, piano or guitars. Others are made by jumping on the floor or banging two things together.

Speech sounds are the sounds we make when we move different parts of our mouth. For example, when we move the front part of our tongue to touch the roof of our mouth, we create a “click” sound. When we close our upper and lower lips together and open them quickly to push air out, we make a “p” sound (as in “pear”) or a “b” sound (as in “bike”).

When we move the back of our tongue to touch the back of the roof of the mouth, we produce “k” (as in “kite”) and “g” (as in “gate”).

So, speech sounds are noises we make with our mouth to pronounce words. Producing speech sounds is complex — we need to move our tongue, teeth and lips, open and close our mouth, control the air from our lungs, and understand the position of our body in space so we can shape our mouth correctly.

For example, to say the word “cat”, we first move the back of the tongue to touch the back roof of the mouth for the “k” sound. Then we open our mouth to the correct shape and control airflow to produce the vowel “a:”. Finally, we move the tip of the tongue to quickly touch the front of the roof of the mouth for the “t” sound.

This becomes more complex because we must move smoothly from the first sound, through the second, to the third — all while controlling airflow to correctly produce the word. We can take this skill for granted until we, or someone close to us, experiences a speech problem.

Children develop at different rates, and there is a wide range of what's considered ‘typical’ development. The table below shows general developmental guidance — not a strict rule every child must follow. For some children development may be faster, for others slower.

Typical Speech Sound Development

Age	What to expect
6–12 months	Children babble using strings of sounds.
12–18 months	Speech becomes clear to close family, but not to unfamiliar people.
18–24 months	May produce the first sound in a word the same as the last, e.g. ‘cat’ as ‘tat’.
2–3 years	Can probably use p, b, t, d, m, n, and w in words.
3–4 years	f, v, s, z, sh may be used but not always correctly. t and d may replace ck and g. By 3½–4 years, s
4–5 years	May not yet produce sh, ch, j, r, l, th correctly.

What Are Speech Problems?

Speech problems are difficulties that prevent someone from producing speech sounds correctly. For example, some people say “r” as “w” — so “rice” becomes “wice” and “rabbit” becomes “wabbit”. Another example is “t” sounding like “d”, so “teddy” becomes “deddy” and “cat” becomes “cad”.

Speech problems can be mild if only one or two sounds are unclear — words are often still understandable. But speech sound problems can be severe when many sounds (e.g. g, t, b, or f) are unclear, making it difficult to understand much of what the person is saying.

What Difficulties Can Arise Without the Right Treatment?

- Children can sound immature compared to others in their age range.
- In school, other children can easily bully children with speech problems.
- They can become shy.
- They might have low self-esteem.
- They may lack confidence and avoid contributing to class discussions, making it harder to develop public speaking skills.
- It could lead to psychological difficulties that continue into adult life.

What Causes Speech Problems?

- Some children are born with differences in the structure of their mouth, tongue, teeth, nose or other organs — such as tongue-tie, a cleft palate, or a cleft lip.
- Hearing is a major factor in speech production — if a sound isn't heard correctly, it can be difficult to say it correctly.
- Problems learning how to put sounds together in a language, to make meaning, can also affect speech production.

Who Can Help?

Speech and Language Therapists are professionally trained to treat these sorts of difficulties. If you are concerned about your child's speech, please get in touch and our team will be happy to help.

Get in touch: info@sosalin.com | 66 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NA | sosalin.com