

Unclear Speech

Introduction

Unclear speech is an expected part of pre school children's development, in the same way that first steps are wobbly and the fine motor skills needed for holding a toy or object are not perfect in those earliest years.

Common themes as children start to talk

First words

First words will be simplified by children (at whatever age those words arrive) and will be 'unclear' to adult listeners when spoken out of context. It is important that those early attempts at words are encouraged and get a positive response, in a similar way to how we respond to children taking their first wobbly steps

Phrases

Moving onto phrases and short sentences can also feel like a step back in clarity sometimes, as the content the child attempts to use might be getting more varied, and more is demanded of their speech skills, to attempt some more tricky speech sound combinations in a row. A 'lispy' speech quality, where the tongue is slightly forward for early words and phrases in the preschool years is not unusual.

Some words may be learnt at an early developmental stage e.g. pyjamas – 'jarmy jarms' and might stay as this 'baby word' for some time, either because those words are easier or because sometimes adults start using the baby word too!

Tongue-tie

Sometimes if a degree of tongue tie has been noted in a baby, parents might naturally be concerned, but a tongue-tie will not necessarily have an impact on speech. Parents of young children often find it helpful to listen out for and notice the tongue tip sounds t/d/n in early words- these are early indicators that the child is elevating the front of their tongue for speech.

Dummy use

Prolonged use of a dummy can impact on speech, particularly if the child attempts to talk with it in their mouth.

Speech sounds

There is an expected developmental order for speech sounds, so if your child has difficulty with one or two sounds this may be normal for their age.

Take a look at the Speech Sound development chart - people often notice their child says red as 'wed', and this is a typical developmental process until around 5 years of age. See our handout on 'typical speech sound acquisition'.

As the child develops they may be able to make a sound but not use it in words. This is a normal stage of development, progressing towards using the sound in simple words, then a wider range of words, then short phrases, sentences and eventually in conversation. A child may be able to make the "s" sound on its own e.g. for a snake sound, but then say "tock" for "sock". The best way to help is to repeat the words correctly, so that the child hears a good role model at a time when that sound/word is important to them.

Strategies that can support a child with unclear speech:

- If a dummy is part of your child's routine, limit its use and work towards giving it up where possible.
- Remember it is always important to respond to what the child says more than how they are saying it.
- Children often do not realise they are mispronouncing words so correcting them or asking them to say it again can be confusing.
- Don't make young child repeat the words, when they are ready, they might spontaneously try to.
- Repeat back what the child says, but with the correct speech model
- If the child says "I like --chool", you could say "Yes school is fun." This way you are saying "Yes I know what you mean, and this is how you say these words". You may want to give just the slightest emphasis to the sound(s) the child has mispronounced. They will not change their production of the word immediately.
- Drawing too much attention to mispronunciations is not helpful. Some older pre schoolers that are almost consistent in their speech might be ready for a positive and fun challenge of using a word or sound they can sometimes do however, e.g. you might say 'ohh school, there's that sc- sound we were practising the other day...school...'
- Have fun with rhyming- Rhyming activities are really helpful for promoting careful listening to speech sounds, enjoy them, and occasionally highlight 2 words from part of a story or song that rhyme eg 'snail...tail- they rhyme!!'
- Build self esteem around communication- if part of the child's conversation is understood, repeat it back. This shows them that they have been partially successful and may encourage them to tell you more. Use strategies to help anticipate what the child might say for example by using a home-school book, in which the parents or nursery can briefly note events or weekend activities; or use books, pictures, models etc. Letting Grandparents know in advance what words might come up e.g. friends' names or a nursery trip to a special place, can be helpful. These can help if the child's speech is very unclear because you have some idea of what they might be trying to communicate. As ever, give praise for other things the child does well.
- Don't pretend to understand but do focus on the parts you do understand, and show you are listening by being down at your child's level, giving time and giving eye contact and encouragement. You can find out more by asking gently probing questions saying "show me" and encouraging the use of gesture and mime as well as the child taking you to things.
- Recapping the part you did understand 'so you took your bucket in the garden and you collected a.....' so that the child only has to repeat the part that has not been understood.
- Sometimes you just have to admit that you didn't understand, and in those situations, point out that your 'listening ears' are finding things tricky today- be practical and explain what else might be

contributing for it being hard for you to listen e.g. if you are walking alongside a noisy road together, or if you have a cold.

- Be as reassuring as possible.
- Sometimes, when a pattern of speech gets very stuck in an early developmental stage, or the child uses unusual speech patterns, speech and language therapy is needed. A referral to audiology for a hearing test is usually suggested at this stage as well

If you have had advice from the Speech and Language Therapist about your child being ready for support to target a specific sound, then the following advice will be relevant to you.

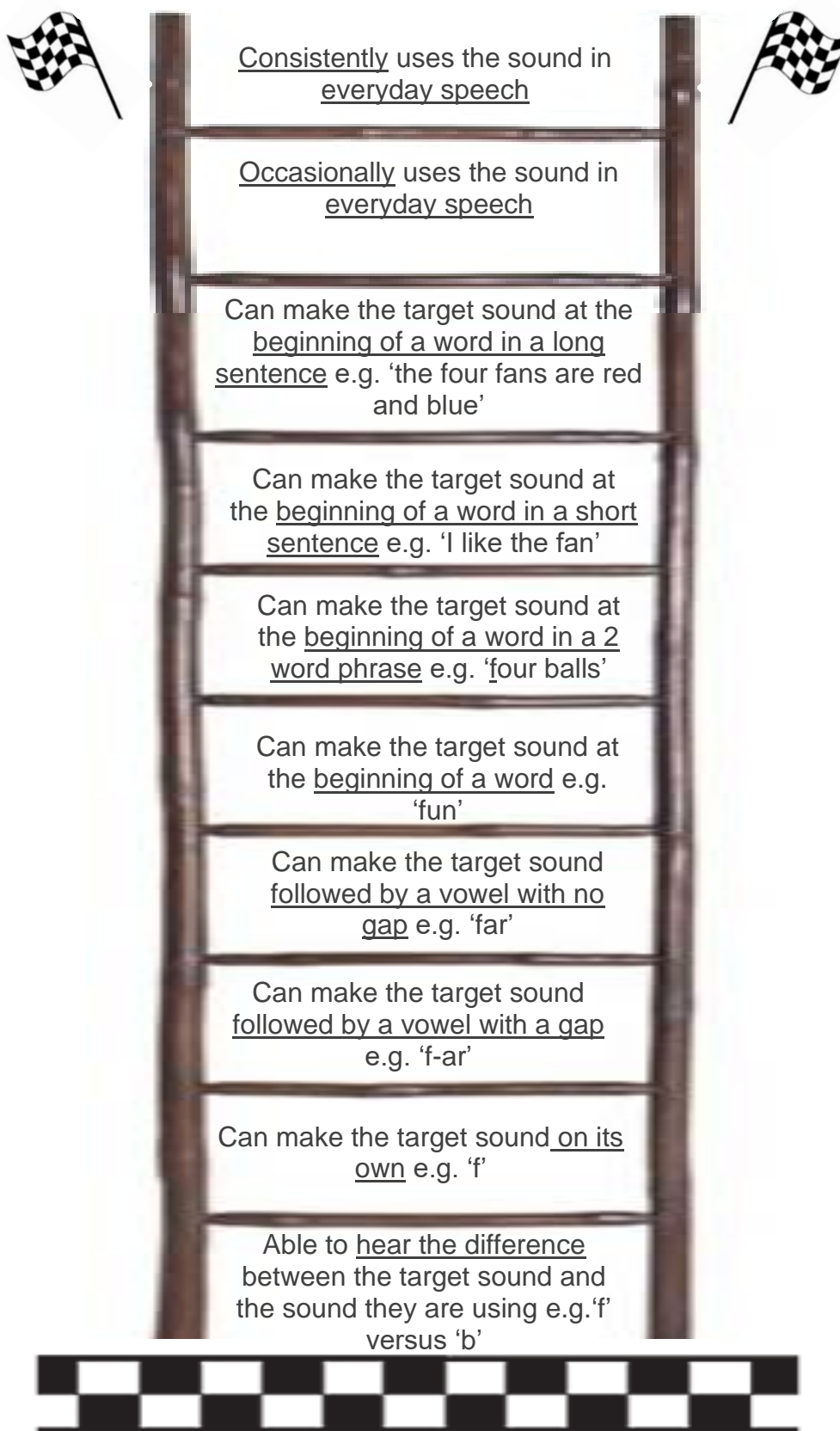
Targeting a Specific Sound

The activities below can be used to work on a specific sound that has been identified as difficult for the child (more than we might expect for their age).

Top Tips:

- Make sure the child can say the sound on its own (e.g. s) before asking the child to say it in words (e.g. sock).
- Emphasise the target sound of the word you are modelling (e.g. sssun).
- Take every opportunity to use words with the target sound when talking with the child (e.g. your hair is really silky, Here are your socks, Teddy is sitting on the seat).
- Make a scrap book of pictures of the target sound using old magazines.
- Choose five minutes in a day and talk to the child, explaining first that he/she will try really hard to say the target sound in words. For the rest of the day do not tell the child they have made a speech error but continue to provide a good speech model by you saying the word correctly.
- Provide specific feedback to the child e.g. that was a good 'sss' sound.
- Use the speech sound ladder when working on a specific speech sound. Use the table for ideas on how to work on each stage of the ladder, and when to move up to the next level. See the following example on how to work on the 'f' sound.

Speech Sound Ladder- starting at the bottom, and taking speech sounds in small steps:



Activities for each stage of the speech sound ladder:

Target	Activity
Can they hear the sound they make?	Get the child to identify which sound they heard from a choice of 2.
Making the sound on its own.	Use a mirror to help the child produce the target sound. Make sure the child can see your mouth and theirs in the mirror so they can see how the sound needs to look as well as their own production.
Add a vowel	<p>Model 'f' with a vowel and a gap e.g. f-oo f-ay f-ee f-oh. Begin to say them closer together until blended.</p> <p>Once the child is confident with this (regularly producing 8/10 sounds correctly), move on to working on words that begin with that sound.</p>
Single words	Use picture cards to practice saying words beginning with the target sound. Use games to get lots of repetitions of the target word.
Short phrases	Use a describing word with each word on the card. This means that the child will be saying two words, including the word with the target sound. For example: big...; small.....; red Big fish Small foot Red face
Simple sentences	Start with a simple sentence. The child should repeat it, adding in different words that begin with the target sound. e.g. I've found a; I've found a
More difficult sentences	Once they can do this easily, give the child the opportunity to use the sound in longer sentences.
Generalising	The next stage is to gradually see the sound being used in their everyday talking. It is a good idea to make time for 5 minutes daily 'special time' to focus on their sound. If they make a mistake, now is the time to prompt them gently: Is it bish or fish? After a while, you will only need to raise an eyebrow or pause to prompt them to self-correct. In this situation, little and often is more effective than long sessions focussing on their speech.

It is important to speak to the Speech and Language Therapist about which sounds should be worked on with a child.