



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 015 | Speech and language disorders

Speech sound disorders

What it means

Speech sound disorders involve difficulty producing or organizing speech sounds in ways that affect intelligibility. This umbrella includes articulation and phonological disorders and can also include speech difficulties associated with motor, structural, or sensory conditions. Some sound errors are normal during development. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Some speech sound disorders have no identified cause. Others relate to hearing loss, differences in the mouth or palate, neurological or motor speech conditions, or broader developmental needs. Accent, dialect, and multilingual speech patterns are differences rather than disorders when appropriate to the child's language community. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Speech may be unusually hard to understand for the child's age and language background. Sounds may be omitted, substituted, distorted, or used inconsistently. The pattern of errors matters. Difficulty can affect confidence and participation, but the child may understand language well. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A speech-language pathologist assesses sounds in words and connected speech, error patterns, consistency, intelligibility, and relevant oral structures. Hearing and language may also be assessed. The clinician distinguishes articulation or phonological difficulties from apraxia, dysarthria, structural issues, and expected dialect or language differences. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Treatment is chosen for the specific speech pattern. It may focus on how to produce a sound, contrast words, reorganize sound patterns, or improve motor speech skills. Practice uses speech tasks that match the goal. Nonspeech mouth exercises are not a universal treatment for speech sound disorders. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Model clear speech without repeatedly demanding corrections. Use short practice only when the clinician has shown the target and cueing method. Give the child time to finish and respond to the message. Keep communication successful even while speech clarity develops.

When to seek help

Sudden slurred speech, new facial weakness, loss of speech skills, or associated swallowing difficulty needs prompt medical evaluation.

Questions for your care team

- Which kind of speech sound difficulty is present?
- Are hearing, language, or structural factors involved?
- What practice method is appropriate for this child's errors?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss speech sound disorders. Speech sound disorders involve difficulty producing or organizing speech sounds in ways that affect intelligibility. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: All unclear speech is not the same problem; therapy approaches must match the underlying speech pattern.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Intelligibility: how understandable speech is.
- Articulation: forming speech sounds.
- Phonology: the sound patterns of a language.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Speech Sound Disorders: Articulation and Phonology

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/articulation-and-phonology/>

[2] Speech and Language Developmental Milestones

<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/speech-and-language>

[3] Childhood Apraxia of Speech

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/childhood-apraxia-of-speech/>