



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 017 | Speech and language disorders

Phonological disorder

What it means

A phonological disorder involves difficulty learning or using the sound patterns of a language. A child may consistently simplify groups of sounds or use one sound in place of several others. This differs from a problem forming only one sound, although articulation difficulties can coexist. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Many phonological disorders have no identified medical cause. Hearing loss, language difficulties, and broader developmental conditions may be relevant. Sound systems develop differently across languages and dialects; expected multilingual patterns should not be labeled disorders. [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 follow patterns such as leaving off certain sounds, simplifying clusters, or replacing classes of sounds beyond expected developmental stages. Different words may sound alike. The child's message can be difficult to understand even when they can produce a target sound in isolation. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A speech-language pathologist analyzes error patterns in words and connected speech, sound contrasts, consistency, intelligibility, and phonological awareness as appropriate. Hearing, language, and oral structures are considered. The assessment distinguishes phonological patterns from apraxia, dysarthria, and normal developmental or linguistic differences. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Therapy may use meaningful word contrasts, cycles of sound targets, or other phonological approaches chosen for the child's pattern. The aim is to help the child reorganize how sounds distinguish words, not simply repeat one difficult sound. Language and emerging literacy needs may also require support. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use clinician-selected games and words briefly and positively. Model contrasts without criticizing the child's pronunciation. Clarify messages kindly when needed and continue reading, singing, and sound play. These activities complement rather than replace individualized therapy.

When to seek help

Loss of previously clear speech or new speech changes with weakness, seizures, or swallowing difficulty needs medical assessment.

Questions for your care team

- Which sound patterns are reducing intelligibility?
- How does the plan account for the child's languages and dialect?
- Should language or early literacy skills also be assessed?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss phonological disorder. A phonological disorder involves difficulty learning or using the sound patterns of a language. 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: Being able to say a sound alone does not necessarily mean the child uses the language's sound patterns consistently.

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

Terms in plain language

- Sound contrast: a sound difference that changes meaning.
- Phonological pattern: a repeated way of simplifying sounds.
- Phonological awareness: noticing and working with speech sounds.

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] Spoken Language Disorders

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/spoken-language-disorders/>

[3] Speech and Language Developmental Milestones

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