

DEAR FAMILIES, *Dear Families*

Many people are surprised to learn that speech-language pathologists (or speech therapists, as they are often called) work with infants and toddlers. A typical comment is, "Don't you know babies can't talk?" True, babies don't speak in words, but any parent can tell you, babies certainly know how to communicate! The cry of hunger, the contented coo, and the fretting sound of a sleepy baby are just a few examples of infant communication. When parents recognize and respond to their baby's cues and signals, they are laying the foundation for later language development.

Infants are faced with the overwhelming task of learning the sounds of our language, the meaning of words, the rules of grammar, and the many ways we can use language to interact with others. Babies also must learn to use a variety of modes, or ways, to communicate such as gestures, facial expressions, and speech. Amazingly, infants usually develop all these skills in a relatively short period of time.

BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN *What happens?* CHILDREN DO NOT DEVELOP THESE SKILLS ON SCHEDULE?

Sometimes well-meaning relatives, friends, or professionals offer advice that may not be accurate.

- "Don't worry, he'll grow out of it."
- "If she doesn't sound better by kindergarten, she can get speech therapy then."
- "She'll never be able to talk. The last person you need is a speech therapist. Buy her a computer that talks."
- "All three-year olds stutter; just tell him to slow down."
- "As soon as the surgeon repairs his cleft palate, his speech will be just fine."
- "There's nothing that can be done for babies with swallowing problems. He'll need to have a feeding tube."
- "Premature babies are always slow in developing speech. It's nothing to be concerned about."

WHO NEEDS THE SERVICES *Who?* OF AN SLP?

A speech-language pathologist could help any child who is at risk for developing or already shows difficulties in communication, language, speech, or feeding and swallowing. Services for eligible infants, toddlers, and their families are partially funded by state and federal money. Here are just a few of the children who might benefit from the services of a speech-language pathologist:

Rachel is a normally developing 27-month-old, except that she only says about 20 single words and usually makes her wishes known by whining and pointing. Grandma says not to worry because Uncle Joe was a late talker too. Grandma may be right, but it is quite likely that Rachel will continue to be seriously delayed in language development. Because a delay in language development can subsequently affect a child's learning, social skills, behavior, and school performance, it is important that Rachel receive services now.

Joshua, a highly verbal three-year old, has begun repeating words and sounds. His attentive family is engaged in a great debate over whether this is real stuttering or "just a stage" as described in the child care manual. As weeks go by, Joshua begins to struggle as he speaks, and he seems unable to breathe at times.

Although the speech of many young children is unclear,

Megan cannot be understood even by her own parents or the sitters at her day care center. Lately she seems to be talking less and less and becomes very frustrated when people don't understand what she is trying to say.

Sylvie's parents have been told that, because of her cerebral palsy, Sylvie will never talk. They have heard that some nonspeaking people communicate with computers, so they are saving money to buy one. What they don't know is that 12-month-old Sylvie needs help to acquire a variety of thinking, cognitive skills and social abilities before she is ready for a computer. A speech-language pathologist might also be able to improve Sylvie's oral-motor skills, help her learn to produce some speech sounds, and determine what combination of speech, sign language, and/or electronic communication aids would be best for Sylvie.

Professionals have tried to reassure Mrs. Martin that help is available for her infant son *Aaron*, who was born with a cleft lip and palate. She is having trouble feeding Aaron, and he isn't gaining very much weight. Mrs. Martin has been told that Aaron may need speech therapy "when he's ready for school," but she hasn't talked to a speech-language pathologist.

Kelli's pediatrician has mentioned that she is "at risk" for speech and language problems. Dr. Baker knows that certain genetic disorders and medical conditions (e.g., Down syndrome, respiratory distress syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, hearing impairment, and seizure disorders) may result in developmental difficulties. Since Kelli was born prematurely and has had frequent ear infections, Dr. Baker is monitoring her communication development closely.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST IN INFANT INTERVENTION?

Working as a member of an interdisciplinary team, the speech-language pathologist can provide expertise in two areas.

- 1) communication delays or disabilities, and
- 2) oral-motor skills

Speech-language services may include screening of at-risk children, comprehensive assessment of children with identified disorders, direct therapy with infants and toddlers, training of parents and other family members, and consultation with other professionals.

Where?

WHERE CAN SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS BE FOUND ?

Speech-language pathologists who provide services to children birth to three years of age may be employed by Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) programs, but you will also find them in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, public schools, university training programs, and private practices. Listen to your instincts as a parent; if you are concerned about your child's oral-motor or communication development consult a licensed speech-language pathologist. The development of effective communication skills is crucial to your child's future.

*It is never
too early to
ask questions
if you suspect
a problem.*

- Nancy Street, MA, CCC-SLP, Speech-Language Pathologist
- Sherry Sancibrian, CCC-SLP, Speech-Language Pathologist

This information is presented by the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association (TSHA). It is designed to inform the general public about the professions of audiology and speech-language pathology and the help available from these professionals. For further information contact:
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