

Reasons for Delayed Speech Development

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What is the cause of your child's speech problem?

Finding the exact cause or causes of your child's speech problem can be difficult. Each child's speech is influenced by many factors, including the ability to hear, the physical development of the mouth and throat, and the abilities the child inherits. The most common causes of delayed speech development are:

1. Hearing Loss

One major cause of delayed speech is hearing loss. Even mild and temporary losses, caused by ear infections or *allergies*, can slow a child's development. Children learn to speak by hearing others speak. When they do not hear speech correctly, they cannot learn to talk correctly. For example, the words "cat," "hat," "sat," "fat," "that," "pat," "bat," and "chat" may all sound the same to a hearing impaired child. If your child's speech is delayed, see an *audiologist* (a specialist in testing hearing).

2. Mouth Deformities

Deformities, or physical defects, in the mouth can cause speech problems. Children born with *cleft palates* or other mouth deformities need special help and medical attention. Fortunately, structural problems bad enough to affect a child's speech are very rare.

3. Mouth Movements

Many children with delayed speech development have trouble learning to move their lips, tongue, and jaws properly. Just as some children walk, run, and play ball awkwardly, some children cannot control their mouth movements as well as others. A few of these children may not chew their food well, and may sometimes choke when they swallow. Some children drool because they have trouble swallowing. Your *speech and language clinician* can help you learn more about your child's mouth movements during speech.

4. Language Delay

Children may have difficulty learning the meaning of words and how to use words in sentences. This language delay will cause speech

problems as well. Learning to talk is very complicated. It includes learning:

- The meaning and use of words
- How to combine words into phrases and sentences
- How to produce the speech sounds
- Combining sounds to say words and sentences

Some children have difficulty learning the rules for combining speech sounds. Errors like "pasghetti" for "spaghetti" are made by a child who knows how to say sounds, but does not know where the sounds belong in words.

Have you ever tried to learn a foreign language? It is very difficult to master a new language. Yet, we expect children to learn our language in an incredibly short period of time! It is not surprising that some children need extra time or special help.

5. Language Disorders

Sometimes speech problems are part of a more serious language disorder. The speech problem is considered less important than the language problem. First, the child needs help to understand and express ideas. Later the child can learn to say sounds correctly. Usually, as the child learns language, speech also becomes clearer. Speech and language clinicians can help these children improve both language and speech skills.

6. Genetic Inheritance

It is common for late speech development to run in families. One or both parents, or any number of aunts and uncles, may have had speech problems when they were young. But children with slow speech development do not always have parents who had the same problem. And parents who had speech problems will not necessarily "pass them on" to all of their children. *Genetic inheritance* is a strong, but not inevitable, factor in late speech development.

7. Bad Speech Habits

Many actions, including walking and talking, become automatic with time and practice. Sometimes when children are beginning to speak, they say sounds incorrectly. If a child

repeats an incorrect pattern long enough, it may become automatic—a bad habit! A child may say the word “school” correctly. Then, a few minutes later, the child will say “tool” in a spontaneous remark. You may also find that your child repeats your speech incorrectly, but does not realize it. These are all examples of bad speech habits.

Summary

These factors are the most common causes of delayed speech development. Usually a child’s speech has been affected by a combination of these problems, not just one. The earlier a problem is detected, the earlier it can be treated and the less effect it will have on your child.

If you have any questions about your child’s speech or language development, ask a speech and language clinician. The clinician will help you identify the factors that may be causing your child’s problems. Early detection and treatment will save time and money. But, more important, your child will be saved from years of possible frustration, learning difficulties, and emotional problems.

Vocabulary

Allergy—An extreme sensitivity to a normally harmless substance, causing physical discomfort.

Audiologist—A specialist in testing hearing.

Cleft palate—An opening or split in the roof of the mouth.

Deformity—A physical abnormality or defect.

Genetic inheritance—A trait passed on from parent to child.

Language disorder—Any difficulty in understanding and using language.

Speech and language clinician—A person who is qualified to diagnose and treat speech, language, and voice disorders.

Refer to:

- 6.5.1 Developmental Dysarthria
- 6.5.2 Developmental Apraxia
- 6.5.4 Help Your Child Develop Feeding Skills
- 10.2.4 Otitis Media and Speech and Language Development
- 10.3.6 Cleft Lip and Palate: Effects on Speech, Language and Development