



LET'S TALK

...FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS

What is Speech? What is Language?

Tom, a 4-year-old child, is hard to understand. Even his parents aren't sure what Tom is trying to say. His words are appropriate to the situation, but they are not clear. He understands what people say to him, but his speech sounds are not precise. Tom has a speech problem.

Jill, age 8 years, fell from a tree and suffered a traumatic brain injury. Although her speech sounds are clear, she has difficulty remembering the right word to say and expressing her thoughts and feelings. She has acquired a language disorder as a result of the fall.

Speech

Speech is a fine motor activity to produce sounds involving the coordination of the lips, tongue, vocal folds, the vocal tract, and respiration. These sounds form the basis of words that are used for the purpose of communication. There is a developmental sequence of sounds. Some sounds are produced earlier than others. For example, children usually say "p, b, m, f, t, d" before "s, th, r." As children develop, they acquire the ability to produce more and more sounds and sound combinations (e.g., blue, flight) clearly. Other types of speech problems include stuttering and a persistent rough, hoarse, or nasal voice quality.

Language

Language is different from speech. Language is a code that we learn to use in order to communicate ideas and express our wants and needs. Reading, writing, understanding, speaking, and some gesture systems are all forms of language.

Language includes the meaning of words, the way words are ordered in a sentence, and the way messages vary depending on the listener and the situation. For example, children learn to talk differently to adults than peers, and to talk differently when they are on a playground or in a classroom.

There are expected language behaviors for different ages. For example, by 1 year of age, a child should use one or two words, follow simple requests ("Come here"), and understand simple questions ("Where's your shoe?"). By 2-3 years of age, the child should be using two or three word sentences to talk about and ask for things and following two requests ("Get the book and put it on the table."). Children are individuals and may develop at slower or faster rates than expected. What is most important is that the child shows continuous speech and language growth.

Speech and Language Disorders

Speech and language disorders occur in both children and adults. Speech and language problems can occur together or independently of each other. Speech disorders include problems with articulation (pronunciation of sounds), fluency (stuttering),

and/or voice (rough, hoarse, or nasal voice quality). Language disorders may involve speaking, listening, reading, or writing.

Speech and language disorders may be developmental or acquired and may result from hearing loss, mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, or other genetic conditions, diseases, or syndromes. Often the cause is unknown in children. Speech-language pathologists are the professionals who assess and treat these disorders.

If you have concerns about your child's speech or language development, please contact an ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist. Go to ASHA's website at www.asha.org for information and referrals or call 800-638-8255.



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