The communication Stop

Kathy Ryan

Independent Speech and Language Therapist

How we produce our speech sounds

(and how you can help your child if they are struggling)

**Introduction**

I will take you through how each sound is made and will give you the prompts **l** use to teach a child how to produce a sound. Your child may have been given a delayed or disordered diagnosis with their speech production. Although it is true that severely delayed or disordered speech patterns can take longer to resolve, the approach l use is often the same as any child l work with. You just have to be prepared that progress will be slower. When l work with a child l focus on what l need them to learn rather than what they are currently doing. The most important thing is to be patient. Sometimes you can work for weeks and see no progress, then, just when you are convinced nothing you do is working you start to see results. What is essential is that you try to do 10-15 minutes each day if you can, rather than longer sessions once or twice a week. You will see much faster results if you do this.

**Please note -** *Not all sounds develop at the same time.*

Earliest sounds are **b d m n**

Additional sounds that develop usually by the age of 3 are **p t** **f s k g l w.**

Once your child can produce these sounds consistently, they should start using them in blends

Later sounds are **sh ch j** whichareusually in place by age 5.

**r th** are the last sounds to develop.

Younger children often do not produce sounds at the end of words until around 3 years of age and can struggle with multi syllabic words even if they can produce the sounds in them.

To help your child, go to the sounds that have been set as their targets and find the information you need.

***Speech therapy follows a process and it vital you do the same***

*Stages of practise / sound development*

The first step is to ensure your child can hear the difference between the sound they should be using and the substitute they are using. For example if your child is using ‘t’ instead of ‘s’ can they hear the difference when you say them. Write the sounds on 2 different pieces of paper and randomly say them and ask your child to point to the one you have said. It is useful to hide your mouth a times to ensure they are not just looking at how you make the sound. Once you know your child can do this you can move on to production. If your child is already receiving speech therapy input, this stage will probably already have been completed.

* The target sound is practised in *isolation* first.

If a child cannot say the sound there is no point in trying to get them to say it in words (l’ve had many parents try to do this)

* Once this is achieved *add a vowel*.

Try to *avoid real words* at this stage as the brain likes to follow familiar patterns so will go back to what it knows making it more difficult for your child to do what they have just learned.

* Once *non word sequences* have been mastered then you can *move onto real words*.

Start with *CV words* (consonant & vowel) e.g. tea, pie

* Once achieved move on to *1 syllable words*. e.g tap, pan.

We usually start with the target sound at the beginning of words and then move on to other word positions (middle and end of words) once achieved. Gradually move on to longer words or try shorter words in short phrases (2 or 3 words).

* Gradually move towards *production in sentences*.

Constantly check to see if you can move on through these steps but if too difficult for your child move back to the previous step. If you move too quickly your child can loose what they have learned and their confidence will be affected. Be patient.

***Top Tips***

I mentioned above that your child will be using replacement sounds for the one/s we want them to use. These sounds often do not just disappear when we start practising the target sounds and you need to be prepared. It can be very difficult for your child to stop using the replacement sound as much as they want to and know they should. Please be patient. I often joke about this a little to reduce the pressure. When this is produced l often say ‘throw that ‘t’ in the bin, or throw that ‘t’ out of the window. This usually makes them smile and helps to focus on the problem without any negativity. Your child will learn and progress more quickly if they are having fun.

Speech sound work is tedious and is focussing entirely on what your child cannot do. To reduce the tedium and ensure your child will continue to engage with you as long as needed, make your work fun. I use games, primarily Orchard toys, as they can be educational, they are fun and the turns for the games are quick. You do not want to take too much time away from practise. When your child tries hard, even when not successful, praise them: ‘good trying well done’. Do not tell them they have achieved the sound production if they have not as this will be confusing. It also saves that praise for the very special moment when they do achieve production of the target sound.

A very good motivator for children and one which l rely on considerably, are stickers. I buy special scented stickers as the children love them and work really hard for their sticker at the end of the session. Having said that, children love all stickers and will be pleased with any recognition of their hard work. Reward charts work really well too, for most children, and can be somewhere for them to place their sticker after they have worn it for a while.

**Producing speech sounds**

**p**  – is a quiet sound we make with our lips. We put our lips together then push the sound out gently. Always show your child how to do this rather than explain, at first. If you can see they are not closing their lips properly then tell them to put their lips together. Some children have weaker lips and struggle to close them completely. An activity l use to help develop lip strength is to hold up a sheet of paper in front of my mouth and then try to move it by closing my lips then puffing out air as l open them. Children like to see how over time they can move the piece pf paper as much as you do.

**b** - is the noisy partner to p and can be developed in the same way.

Some children cannot produce ‘p’ but they can produce ‘b’. This means they do not have a problem with how the sound is made. They have difficulty producing quiet sounds and will often struggle with ‘t’ and ‘k’ as well.

The approach is different in this instance as the focus becomes about teaching volume control. Therapy usually starts by teaching quiet versus noisy. I model production of ‘p’ and emphasise how quiet it needs to be. Usually a child will learn this quickly. The difficult part is adding a vowel to the ‘p’ as the vowel is noisy.

e.g. p oh p ea

I use a visual prompt with this as well as modelling what l want the child to do. It’s called cueing.

I put together the tips of my thumb and index finger next to my lips and open my fingers to show the growth in sound as l produce the vowel (the bigger the sound the more space between my finger tips).

My cue is: “quiet p noisy oh” (and practise this several times)

 “quiet p noisy ea” (and practise this several times)

It’s really important you show through modelling how to blend the 2 sounds. It can be easy to do them slightly apart but that is not the aim. Blending the sounds is the aim and very important. It may take days or even weeks to get to the point where your child can do this but usually once you do, it will get easier. This is the most difficult stage.

Once your child can control and change the volume at this stage l look at 1 syllable word production. It is important at this stage you avoid using words with ‘p t k’ elsewhere in the word as these are quite sounds and your child is not ready to cope with additional quiet sounds in the words just yet. I prompt when practising by saying: quiet p, noisy an, pan and repeat at least 3 times.

Once they have mastered 1 syllable words you can then introduce words with ‘p’ at the end of words ie pipe, pope, pip. The prompt to use before you attempt production is: ‘quiet p noisy i quite p pipe.’ We then practise at least 3 times. Once your child has shown control at this level then l do words such as paper, puppy, purple (2 syllable CVCV words) these are more difficult and the prompt for these are: quiet p noisy a quiet p noisy er paper. As you can, see these words take a lot of control to achieve.

**t** - we make **‘t’** with our tongue. We place it towards the front of the roof of our mouth (on the ridge just behind our teeth). Some place their tongue behind their upper teeth. Either is fine. **‘t’** is a quiet sound. It is not common for children to struggle with this sound unless they cannot produce quiet sounds (see above). An exception is a child who has had a dummy for a long time or has walked around with a bottle hanging from their mouth. They may not use their tongue to make this sound and may instead use ‘k’. If your child is doing this they will need lots of help to change this. In my experience this is one of the most difficult speech errors to change.

 In more severe cases some children may not be able to feel the tip of their tongue and will need help to develop this. I have used ice or the placement of the tongue tip between the teeth when attempting to produce sounds to help with this. If a child cannot feel their tongue, they don’t know if it is where it needs to be, to produce the target sound.

My prompt for producing ‘t’ is to: put your tongue at the top of your mouth and push it down to make the sound. The sound is held by the tongue and then released when the tongue moves.

Listen carefully for the sound. Children can develop movement of their tongue while still producing the sound at the back of their mouth. Sometimes they can even use the tip of their tongue but curl it back in their mouth so it is different. If they make the sound at the front of their mouth with their tongue you will know. If in doubt practise again.

Children who cannot produce this sound, in my experience, can really struggle to control movement of their tongue once they try and can find it twisting and turning as if it has a mind of it’s own. I do what l call ‘keep fit of the tongue’ to overcome this. Without any mention of making sounds with their tongue you need to help your child to learn to control movement of it. Until this happens they will not be able to use their tongue to produce ‘t’.

Each day for a week practise a few times a day for 2-3 minutes relaxing the tongue then touching to top of their mouth with their tongue, then relaxing their tongue, then touching the top of their mouth with their tongue. Over the week the tongue control should develop and then your child can start to practise ‘t’ production. Once production is achieved in isolation (t on it’s own) then add a vowel and move through the stages as outlined above.

**d** - is the noisy partner to ‘t’ and can be developed in the same way (see above)

If your child can produce ‘d’ but not ‘t’ it is likely their difficulty is in producing quiet sounds. See above for ‘p’ for how to approach working on this.

**k** - is a sound that is made at the back of the mouth. This can be easy for some children to develop but very difficult for others, particularly if they become tense when practising.

The first thing l ask a child to do is to do a ‘soft cough’ and l demonstrate this. If noisy l discourage this as regular practise could hurt their throat/voice. I talk about where our cough lives and point to my throat. I then talk about our ‘k’ and how it lives where our cough lives. Then l show the child by modelling ‘k’ production. I deliberately have my mouth quite open as this is the next step. If your child opens their mouth wide (like a crocodile) it is considerably more difficult for them to use their tongue to try to make the sound as they are likely to make ‘t’. They will do this at first if this is the established pattern, but practise will change this. Be patient. And remember to praise ‘good trying’. Once the sound is produced in isolation add a vowel and move through the stages as outlined above.

NB if your child is using ‘t’ for ‘k’ avoid using words (at first) with ‘t’ in them as their brains will find this very difficult. Gradually introduce these words once consistent production of words has been achieved.

**g** - is the noisy partner to ‘k’ and can be developed in the same way (see above)

**m** - is one of the few sounds we produce using our nose. Our mouth is completely closed and we use our lips to make the sound. We push air through our nose. Most children do not experience difficulty producing this sound. If your child is unable to close their lips completely then see above for ‘p’ for a strengthening activity.

**n** - is another sound that is produced with our nose. Our tongue is placed on the ridge on the roof of our mouth just behind our top teeth. Air is then pushed through our nose.

Difficulty producing this sound is not common but when present can be hard to change for children. Some children push too much air through their nose and others struggle to use their tongue. This is a difficult sound to change and you must follow the advice your therapist gives you as they will work out what is going wrong and what needs to be done to change production.

f - this is an airflow sound and in many children has been replaced with a sound that is not e.g. t. This is common and expected when very young but should develop naturally over time (see above). If it does not the following will help.

Show your child how to place their upper teeth very gently on their lower lip. For some children just doing this can be very difficult so practise this several times before moving on to attempt production of the sound. Only once achieved control of placing upper teeth on lower lip should you attempt production.

Now model production placing upper teeth on lower lip and gently pushing air between your teeth and lips. Make sure your child is not pushing their teeth onto their lip too hard as this could hurt. Keep practising at this level until consistent production is achieved and then move through the stages as outlined above. As this is a sound that can be lengthened slightly to aid with blending with a vowel etc it can be an easier sound to work on.

**v** - is the noisy partner to ‘f’ and can be developed in the same way (see above)

**s** - is another airflow sound and can often be replaced with a sound which is not e.g. ‘t’

This is expected but a child should have developed production by age 3. If not you can help by doing the following: model the sound to your child. Some children will be able to copy you straight away. If they can, work through the stages carefully.

If they cannot do the following: ask them to put their teeth together and use the ‘pointy’ bit of their tongue to feel where their teeth come together. Then move back their tongue a little way so it is not touching their teeth (this will allow air to come through their teeth). Now make the sound. It is important that the sound is made at the front of their tongue. If you hear anything that sounds like blowing or that the air is coming from the sides of their mouth then prompt your child to use the pointy bit of their tongue to make the sound. Keep practising in this way until production is achieved consistently. Then move through the stages as outlined above.

**z** - is the noisy partner to ‘s’ and can be developed in the same way (see above)

**l** - is made by placing the tip of our tongue on the ridge on the top of our mouth just behind our teeth and then moving it down while we make the sound. Children often replace ‘l’ with ‘w’ as part of their normal development but should grow out of it before they go to school. Although l usually teach sounds on their own before adding a vowel l often teach use of the tongue to make this sound by asking the child to copy ’lalalala.’ We keep doing this until the tongue is used to make the ‘l’ as needed. Then l go back and do the sound on it’s own, then with a vowel, then at the beginning of words in the usual way.

This is usually a straightforward sound to sort out. If a child has a ‘tongue tie’ they may find raising their tongue to the roof of their mouth difficult. After surgery they may need some practise to develop sounds like ‘l’ but the above technique has worked with any children l have seen.

**w** - is made with both lips starting in an oo shape and then opening to produce the sound. Go through the usual stages to develop. This is not a common difficulty and is usually easily sorted where needed.

**y** - is made at the back of the tongue. It is quite unusual for this sound to be a difficulty.

**r** - is one of the last sounds to develop and will usually be replaced with ‘w’ for some time (sometimes up to age 6). This sound is produced by placing the upper teeth on the lower lip. I often have to prompt a child not to use both lips and where needed to let me see their top teeth. Go through the usual stages to develop.

**sh** - is made with ‘oo’ shaped lips and the tongue low in the mouth. I prompt children by asking them to do oo lips and to let their tongue go to sleep as it does not need to do any work. Often this sound is replaced with ‘s’ so listen out for this sound when they attempt production. If your child’s attempt sound like ‘s’ look at their lip shape. If they have smiley lips then remind them to make an ‘oo’. If their lips are the correct shape ask them to put their tongue down as ‘s’ is made with our tongue in the middle of our mouth and this is the likely cause of the ‘s’. Keep practising until ‘sh’ is consistent before moving through the stages.

**ch** - is made with ‘oo’ lips. The primary focus however is on turning ‘t’ into ch’. There are a number of different prompts that teach ‘ch’ but this in my experience is the most successful.

Prompt your child to get their tongue ready for ‘t’. Then to push it down and turn ‘t’ into ‘ch’. Make ‘ch’ noisy is a prompt l use a lot. Throughout all early stage practise, model what you want your child to do. It is particularly useful with this sound to help your child know what they are aiming for. Keep practising at this level before moving on through the stages.

**J** - is the noisy partner of ‘ch’ and is made in a similar way. Just replace ‘t’ with ‘d’ and prompt to turn ‘d’ into ‘j’ and push the sound down to make it noisy.

**Blends** - it is important that you do not attempt to develop use of sounds in a blend until secure as a sound e.g. don’t try to teach ‘snore’ until your child can confidently say ‘sore’.

‘f & s blends can be a little easier to develop as they can be lengthened slightly to aid blending with the rest of the word. A technique l often use when l first start working on blends and a child is struggling, is to remove the first sound in the blend, say the remainder of the word 3 times and then put the first sound back onto the word. Do this with as many words as needed but attempt each word together first as children can progress quickly with blends.

**Multi syllable words** – many children find these words difficult to produce. This is often a simple difficulty to resolve. Teach your child to discreetly tap out the syllable on their knee, for the words they need to produce. This works well to focus production of the sound at the beginning of each syllable. It can be used as a strategy without anyone else seeing the child and therefore very discreet.