

Phonological problems

What are phonological problems?

A child with a phonological problem has a difficulty pronouncing a number of sounds. The sounds which are mispronounced can be grouped according to certain features, such as the place in the mouth where the sound is produced or how it is produced.

There are many phonological processes (sound rules) which a child uses which affect the pronunciation of groups of similar sounds. Examples include...

- **fronting**, when sounds which should be produced at the back of the mouth are produced further forward in the mouth (“car” becomes “tar” or “par”, “gun” becomes “dun” or “pun”, “sing” becomes “sin” or “sim”);
- **backing** – the opposite of fronting – when sounds are produced further back in the mouth (“pen” becomes “ten” or “ken”, “table” becomes “cable”, “bear” becomes “dere” or “gere”, “dog” becomes “gog”);
- **stopping** of fricatives, when longer fricative sounds (f, v, s, z, sh, th) are pronounced as short plosive sounds (p, b, t, d, k) (“sun” becomes “tun”, “finger” becomes “pinger”);
- **cluster reduction**, when the child omits one of the two or three consonants which occur together (“black” becomes “back”, “sweet” becomes “weet”, “bread” becomes “bed”) – l, r and s are the most commonly-omitted letters.

A child may make use of more than one phonological process, even within one word. The processes may be affected by the position of the sounds in the words. For example, fronting sounds only at the beginning of words, so that “cup” becomes “tup” but “back” is pronounced correctly.

The child may use the processes consistently or inconsistently – every k and s sound at the beginning of words, or only some of them. Because of the number of sounds affected, the child’s speech is often unintelligible to strangers and to the family, causing both parties to become frustrated.

A phonological problem may also be referred to as a phonological disorder. A child is seen to have a phonological delay when using phonological processes which are more typical of a younger child. A child’s phonology is disordered when the processes used are inconsistent and not following the normal pattern of phonological development.

Phonological problems may be caused by many factors including...

- general immaturity or learning disability
- recurrent middle ear infections which affect the child’s ability to hear differences among similar sounds
- low motivation on the part of the child, because the family understands the child anyway, or does not expect the child to speak more clearly
- poor control of the lip, tongue and palate muscles used for speech.

Phonological problems can also be associated with reading difficulties. A phonological problem cannot be caused by a tongue-tie. A tongue-tie affects the pronunciation of one sound only – r.

References

Dean, E, Howell, J, Hill, A, & Waters, D (1990), *Metaphon resource pack*. Slough: NFER Nelson

Howell, J, & Dean, E (1998), *Treating phonological disorders in children*. London: Whurr

Lancaster, S & Pope, L (1989), *Working with children’s phonology*. Bicester: Winslow Press

Lewis, B A, Freebairn, L A & Taylor, H G (2000), Follow-up of children with early expressive phonology disorders. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 33(5), 433-444.

Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Specific language impairment (1)
- Dyslexia/specific learning difficulties (2)
- Articulation (10)

Other organisations which can help

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
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