

Early Speech Sounds

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"There is a one-year-old in my neighborhood who is talking in complete sentences, and I can understand every word she is saying!" "My Billie is two-years-old and no one knows what he is saying!" Speech Pathologists and educators frequently hear statements like these from parents. The question many parents are asking is, *"Why does it take so long for some children to learn to pronounce words, so that they can be understood?"*

Articulation, or the pronunciation of speech sounds in words, is a complicated motor skill. A great analogy is to think about articulation like riding a two-wheeled bicycle. Some children will get on a bicycle, wobble a little, and then take off with hardly any spills. They have learned to peddle, steer, brake, and balance all at the same time. Other children will take months to coordinate it all and have Band-Aids all over to prove it! The mouth is like that bicycle, and your teeth, lips, and tongue are the pedals, handlebars, and brakes that must all work together to achieve speech sounds. On a bike, you can look down at your hands and feet, but you can't see your mouth (unless you are looking in a mirror). The child must rely on listening and feeling the speech sounds. Children cannot learn to say sounds until they are old enough for muscle growth and fine motor ability to support this motor skill.

Between one and three years of age, children should use a wide variety of consonant sounds in babbling, vocal play, and first words. First words may not sound perfect, but using them to communicate is wonderful, no matter what they sound like. If a child pronounces juice as "doo" but uses that word to label his/her juice and to request more juice, he/she is using a word functionally to communicate. Try to avoid saying things like, "No, not doo, say juice." Instead, try "You said juice. Let's go get some juice!" The child then has a model for pronouncing "juice" accurately, and eventually the speech will improve.

The first sounds that toddlers begin to master are usually lip sounds "p, b, m, w." Words like "mom, pup, mine, ball, what" may start sounding perfect. Also "h" and "n" are early sounds. Remember that sounds in the middle of words or at the end may be more difficult than beginning sounds. Below is a chart detailing sound development.

Age of child	90% of children master these sounds
2 years old	p, d, m, w, h, n
3 years old	t, b, k, g
4 to 5 years old	f, v, y
5 to 7 years old	s, z, j, l, r, sh, ch, th, blends