

How to communicate with children who have unclear speech.

We want to build positive experiences of communication for all children and there are many simple things anybody can do to successfully talk to a child with unclear speech.

At the mild end, this may be a child using a "t" instead of a "c, k". So they would call a 'cat' a 'tat' and a 'sock' a 'sot'. If you are talking to a child making these sorts of errors, hopefully you can still understand them or, if not, have a good idea what they mean, even if you miss a word or two. However some children may only use a few sounds and be very hard to understand.

According to the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), 8-9% of younger children have a speech sound disorder and by the age of 6, roughly 5% of children still have a noticeable speech disorder. Speech difficulties can persist into teenage years and occasionally adulthood. So even waiting at the school gates means you are quite likely to meet and talk to children with speech difficulties.

Show them that you're listening

We all know how hard it is to talk to someone who isn't really listening, or who is doing something else at the same time. If you can, give your full attention. If appropriate, get down to your child's eye level, look at them when they speak, and listen. Don't worry if you don't understand every word, it's more important to show them you want to talk and that you are listening.



Repeat back

If you are finding it hard to understand the whole sentence, repeat back the words you have understood. This shows that you are trying to understand and gives your child a chance to repeat their message. Some children are very good at explaining in a different way or using a different word to help you.

Show me

This works well with younger children who are more likely to be talking about something in the room! If you are struggling to understand the critical word, ask them to show you or take you to it.

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Offer Choices

This is another good tip with younger children. Try offering your child two options. In this way they can just say one word which you are much more likely to understand, but still communicate what they want. This can also help stop your child getting frustrated.

Don't presume

Just because a child has a speech sound difficulty doesn't necessarily mean they have a hearing difficulty or that they don't understand you. Don't shout, it's not going to help. Also don't talk for them or try and fill in. Give them time to talk.

Encourage gestures

We all naturally move our hands and arms when talking to emphasise certain words; admittedly some of us more than others. If you are a parent or someone who works with a child regularly, encouraging them to make gestures or natural signs can help. For example, you can point at your body if you are talking about yourself or you can mime actions like swimming or writing.

Don't correct

Few things will stop a child wanting to talk to you more than being constantly corrected. Rather than getting them to repeat words, just say it back to them the errors correct. For example,

Child: "Ta, ta me tee ta!" (cat, cat, me see cat)

Adult: "Oh yes, I see the cat too"

Admit you don't understand

If you are finding it hard to understand, your child has repeated the word and they can't show you, don't be afraid to say "Sorry, I can't get that word right now." This way you have still acknowledged your child but not implied that they have done anything wrong. You need to be very careful of agreeing or saying OK when you don't understand as this may be an inappropriate response and your child will probably know. Or you might have just agreed to take them to Disneyland!

Try your best! Showing your child you are interested in what they have to say and that you are trying to understand is the most important part of any interaction!