



What to Do When You Don't Understand Your Child's Speech

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Speech is a skill that children learn, starting with the first sounds they make as babies. This learning process is known as vocal play. Once children begin to understand language, they use the sounds they have learned to form words. For most children, their first words are made up of sounds that are easy to make, such as *Mama*, *Dada*, or *bye-bye*. Parents find it is easy to understand what their children have said.

As children begin to develop more complicated language, more complicated sounds are incorporated, such as /s/, sh, r, th/, and /l/. With more complicated language comes the production of longer words that require more fine motor control and effort to make. Most children, by the time they are ready to go to school, have speech that is intelligible to an unfamiliar listener.

Some children take longer to develop their speech to a level where everything they say can be understood. There are a variety of reasons why this happens. A complete assessment by a qualified speech-language pathologist can help you to understand the problem and what you, as parents, can do to help your child.

As parents, you have listened since your child said that first word. As a result, your child's speech pattern may become like a unique language to you. You understand that when your child says something like "tutu," the child is probably asking for a cookie. However, to people who are unfamiliar with your child's speech pattern, the word is unintelligible and meaningless. For a child who is experiencing these kinds of difficulties, attempts at speech may become very frustrating. Speech may not always be intelligible, even to the child's own parents, and the child may speak as little as possible to avoid the frustration. Parents, too, feel frustrated in being unable, at times, to understand their child's efforts at communication. If your child is having such difficulties with speech, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Avoid Direct Correction

When your child says a word that is in error, try to avoid directly pointing it out. Saying to a child, "That's not right. Say 'cookie,' not 'tutu,'" may give the wrong message. Acceptance of a child's attempts at communication, especially by parents, is very important at any age.

Repeat and Model

When your child does say something in error that you recognize, repeat the word or phrase using a slightly slower rate, and place some emphasis on the word. For example, if the child says, "I want a tutu," say, "Oh, you'd like a *cookie*?"

Ask for a "Replay"

If your child says something that you cannot understand, asking for a "replay" gives you a second chance to interpret what was said. You might say something like, "I didn't quite hear what you said. Could you say that again?" When the child does repeat the word or phrase, watch for any gestures or eye movement in a particular direction that might give you a hint as to what your child wants. For instance, the child might look toward a cookie jar or be physically suggesting that a trip to the bathroom is in order.

Ask for a Demonstration

If you are still unable to understand your child's attempts at communication, ask your child to show you what is desired. Put the blame for the lack of understanding on your ears rather than the child's speech. For example, you might say, "You know, I don't know what's wrong with my ears today, but I can't quite understand what you said you wanted. Can you help me by showing me what you want?" When the child leads you to the correct object say, "Oh, that's what you said! You wanted some *juice*," putting a slow emphasis on the corrected word.

Play with Sounds

The process of learning speech sounds is largely one of imitation. The child hears what is said and repeats it. Most attempts a child makes at words are the child's version of what the child heard the parents say. To encourage the correct production of a variety of sounds, parents can play sound games with their children. Examples of these activities are as follows:

- "What does the _____ (animal name) say?" Children generally like animals, and playing games which imitate animal noises can be a fun way to develop sounds. Don't forget the angry cat that says, "F-F-F!", the donkey that says, "He-haw, He-haw," or the crow that says, "Caw-caw-caw."