

Children with phonological delay/disorder

Also known as speech delay or disorder

General information

A child with a phonological delay/disorder has difficulty producing speech.

Phonological delay/disorder:

- Affects the child’s sound system meaning their speech is unclear and difficult to follow
- Isn’t primarily caused by physical disabilities
- Is often part of language delay/disorder/impairment but may occur as a standalone difficulty

Children with phonological difficulties are likely to have difficulties with all aspects of phonological awareness including discriminating between sounds, holding several sounds in their short-term memories and blending sounds. Both real and pseudo words will be affected.

Phonological delay is used when a child has patterns of speech which are more typical of a younger child. The sound system is developing normally, but at a much slower rate than expected.

Phonological disorder will involve some delay, but also the use of phonological processes that are atypical, inconsistent or not following the expected pattern of phonological development. This is likely to make the child less clear, will be more persistent and require specialist support.

Helping to access the phonics screening check

Children with phonological difficulties are likely to find it very hard accessing the check because they haven’t mastered the phonological skills required for speech development, and these are the same as those required for learning literacy. It may be appropriate for some children with significant phonological difficulties to be disapplied from the check.

Possible issues	Ways to help
If a child makes errors it will be almost impossible to tell whether these are due to them not knowing the phoneme associated with the grapheme, or being unable to actually say the phoneme	Seek information from a speech and language therapist to understand the specific difficulties a child has It might be necessary to use alternative strategies to check phoneme-grapheme correspondence, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying single graphemes by signing or gesture (for example, Jolly Phonic action, Cued Articulation sign) • Compiling a list of simple words that are within the child’s sound system to use as a screen
Children with phonological difficulties may need more time to process and produce their responses	There should be no time constraint on them completing the check
Children are likely to have difficulty with non-words	They will need extra tuition in this area

You should also consider the following in your literacy work with children who have a phonological delay/disorder:

- Can the child make a Phoneme Grapheme correspondence between the graphemes and sounds (both consonants and vowels) that they can produce?
- Can the child indicate with sign or gesture (Cued Articulation or Jolly Phonics) when shown a grapheme, even for speech sounds they are unable to produce?
- Can the child point to the grapheme for a single spoken phoneme (similarly can they manually identify the onset for a simple spoken word)?
- Can the child recognise correct and incorrect productions of words?³⁴
- Can the child match a written word to a picture when they are, given a choice of several pictures and one check word?

The outcome of the check

Some children with phonological difficulties may be able to show phonic knowledge of the speech sounds that they regularly use in the right way. A speech and language therapist will be able to supply details about a child's speech and phonological awareness skills.

Depending on the nature and degree of phonological difficulties children are likely to have difficulties with:

- Discriminating the sounds they hear
- Holding the sounds in their working memory, so they will have difficulties being able to break up the sounds and remember them to then blend them together
- Blending phonemes
- Producing speech sound clusters (for example, 's' + 'n' as in 'snake'; 'p' + 'l' as in 'plane')
- Higher level aspects of phonics, for example, split digraphs and diphthongs, although production of single vowels may be possible

³⁴ Claessen et al, 2007; Sutherland and Gillon, 2007

Responding to the outcome of the check

Children with phonological difficulties have underlying difficulties with all speech processing skills and so will need a lot of extra support and practice with phonological awareness skills including:

- ✓ Sound discrimination
- ✓ Recognition of rhyme
- ✓ Production of rhyme
- ✓ Syllable segmentation
- ✓ Syllable blending
- ✓ Onset and rhyme
- ✓ Blending and segmenting simple single phonemes (excluding consonant blends, for example 'st')

Children with phonological difficulties will be helped by any visual approaches and programmes that allow staff and child to refer to sounds through gesture or sign. They will also benefit from colour coded systems as visual reminders of language structures or of sound groups.

Awareness of their own speech sounds and language abilities (metaphonic and metalinguistic awareness) are also essential; ensuring the child has the necessary concepts and vocabulary to discuss these.

For children with phonological difficulties, cumulative blending is more helpful than sounding each letter out separately, because it sounds more like the target word. An example is: 'sss', 'i', 'ssi', 'ssi-t', 'sit'. This is very important in the early stages of introducing the blending of simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words.

Children with phonological difficulties may always find a phonic approach to reading difficult. For this reason it's important to incorporate a range of different approaches including whole word reading, common spelling patterns, explicit teaching of reading and spelling rules and comprehension monitoring.

An evidence resource to inform next steps

- Most children whose speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) that are not resolved by 5.6 years have difficulties with learning to read,³⁵ so early identification and intervention is essential
- Phonological awareness is a vital foundation skill in learning to read and spell³⁶
- Phonological awareness at 3.6 – 5.0 years is the best predictor of literacy achievement³⁷
- Not all children with phonological difficulties will have difficulty with literacy acquisition but many will, particularly those with rhyme, alliteration and syllable segmentation difficulties³⁸
- Early phonological and metaphonological intervention can help with understanding and use of speech sounds and clear speech, therefore supporting literacy acquisition³⁹
- Children whose speech isn't following typical patterns are most at risk of long term literacy difficulties⁴⁰
- Care must be taken not to focus just on speech sounds. Language is also needed to support both decoding and text comprehension⁴¹

³⁵ Bishop, D.V.M. and Adams, 1990

³⁶ Catts, H., 1989; Stackhouse, 2000

³⁷ Hesketh, 2004

³⁸ Holm et al, 2008

³⁹ Bernhardt and Major, 2005

⁴⁰ Bernhardt and Major, 2005

⁴¹ Denne et al, 2005

Additional resources and further support

Publications and resources:

Dean, E., Howell, J., Hill, A., and Waters, D, (1990), Metaphon resource pack, Slough: NFER Nelson (Minimal pair therapy, Maximal pair therapy, phonological therapy – also useful for introducing the language to refer to sounds and sound features)

Black Sheep Press - publishes (as paper or CD) consonant worksheets, pairs in pictures and phonological awareness sheets - www.blacksheepress.co.uk/acatalog/Speech.html

Passy, J, (2007) Cued Articulation and Cued Vowels, Ponteland: STASS Publications. Booklets, DVD, Cards and wall charts on how to 'see a sound' - www.stasspublications.co.uk/index.php?cPath=22

Hughes, S, and Ramsay, N, Bigmouth Sound Pack, Ponteland: STASS, A friendly character who shows children how to produce sounds (articulograms) - www.stasspublications.co.uk/product_info.php?products_id=77

Jolly Phonics - <http://jollylearning.co.uk>

Organisations and websites:

I CAN – www.ican.org.uk

Afasic – www.afasic.org.uk

Case Study

Yasmin has a phonological disorder. Her teaching staff find understanding her very difficult and she has regular speech and language therapy support. Yasmin was able to do some of the items on the phonics screen - those that contained the sounds that she is able to say. However on some items it was difficult for the adult administering the check to know if she had blended the sounds correctly or not as she cannot say all sounds the right way.

What helps Yasmin

To help, staff used a signing system that represented sounds when they spoke, Cued Articulation. Seeing the sounds as well as hearing them helped Yasmin to remember what she had heard and gave her longer to process the information.

Yasmin was also helped by a very systematic approach to learning phonics; staff needed to build in opportunities for over learning and revision and build on previous knowledge. Multi-sensory approaches and hands on manipulation of sounds using resources such as phoneme frames and wooden letters also helped her to process and read the target words.