



## **OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES**

*by Helen L. Kaye, M.Ed., CCC/SLP*

As a speech pathologist, one of the questions I'm frequently asked is whether a 3-year-old should speak clearly enough to be understood by strangers.

At age 3, approximately 80 percent, of what a child says should be understandable to people outside of the immediate family. As a child becomes older, he learns to master the more complex sounds of our language. There is a general sequence of sound acquisition that can be used to help determine the development of a particular child. Although there will be individual variations in the specific age of acquisition and exact sequence of speech sound development, some generalizations can be made.

The following sounds can usually be expected to develop before age three: p, b, m, w, t, d, n, k, g, h. The more difficult sounds of our language (th, z, v, sh, ch, j) usually are not present consistently in the speech of children younger than four. Beyond these generalizations, decisions regarding the adequacy of a preschooler's speech is based on the number of correctly produced sounds, the types of sound substitutions, and the overall intelligibility of the speech. As a general rule, a child entering kindergarten should be capable of producing all of the individual phonemes, or speech sounds, of our language, although he still may not use a few of them consistently in his speech, such as the "th" in "thumb". The consonant clusters, or blends, such as the "sq" in "square" or "str" in "string" may continue to be difficult for some children until they are 6 or 7 years old.

Any time parents feel that their child's speech is not developing adequately, I recommend that they seek a professional opinion. Speech problems are much easier to correct in the preschool years before the articulation develops into an established habit. Also, the child's self-esteem can be seriously damaged if he is the object of frequent teasing and ridicule by peers who imitate or derogate the "baby talk."

Another concern is stuttering. The majority of preschoolers go through a period of dysfluency, or lack of fluency, in their speech.. They may repeat entire words, the first sound of a word, of the first syllable. Sometimes they interject "uhs" and "ums", or revise their sentence half-way through. Usually this occurs when the child is very excited, fatigued, or perceives that he does not have the parent's attention.

There are many reasons for children's dysfluencies. They seem to occur during periods of rapid growth in the child's language, when he may be learning more 'complex sentence forms, such as

the proper way to ask a question or use the past tense. Since he lacks much experience in these grammatical structures, he may hesitate, back up, revise what he is saying, or stumble on a word.

It is also true that at times some children seem to lack the coordination to get words out smoothly - as if there's a break in rhythm between breathing and speaking. This can result in a slight prolongation of a sound or a break in a word. Most children outgrow this dysfluent period in a matter of months.

If your child is having these normal dysfluencies, I recommend that you be more patient when he is speaking. Give him good eye contact and let him know by your attention that you are interested and he need not rush. If you can slow down your rate of speaking, you will set a model for him to follow. Try to prevent other family members from interrupting while he is speaking, especially siblings.

You may want to establish a rule of turn-taking in conversation, where each family member gets to speak without fear of interruption. This takes the pressure off the child to hurry while speaking.

When should you become concerned about stuttering? If your child obviously struggles to get words out and the dysfluencies increase in frequency and complexity, I would recommend seeking a professional evaluation.

The "warning signs" of stuttering published by the Speech Foundation of America include:

1. frequent sound and syllable repetitions,
2. frequent prolongations of sounds that increase in duration
3. rises in loudness and pitch of the voice during a struggle to say a word
4. obvious tension and struggle speak
5. fear and avoidance of speaking

If your child shows some of these behaviors, he is unlikely to "outgrow" the stuttering without direct help.