

A Guide to Speech Sound Development

"My two-year-old talks a lot, but no one knows what he is saying!"

Parents often express this concern to speech-language pathologists and educators. The questions many parents ask are, "Why does it take so long for some children to learn to pronounce sounds correctly?" and "Will my child ever learn to speak clearly?"

Articulation, or the pronunciation of speech sounds in words, is a complicated motor skill. Just as some children learn to ride a bike in a few hours, some children may acquire speech sounds quickly. They learn to coordinate the articulators-tongue, teeth, and lips-with a breeze. On the other hand, there may be children that take months to pronounce age appropriate speech sounds. Unlike looking down at your feet peddling a bike, we cannot see our mouths moving (without a mirror), so children have to 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 these motor skills.

Children should use a wide variety of consonant sounds in babbling, vocal play, and first words between one and three years of age. The early words may not sound perfect, but using them to communicate is wonderful, no matter what they sound like. If a child pronounces cat as "ta" but uses the word correctly to label a pet cat, he/she is using that word functionally to communicate. Try to avoid saying things like, "No, not ta, say cat." Instead acknowledge the child's attempt at communicating by saying "Yes, that is a cat. Let's go pet the cat." The child then has a positive model for pronouncing "cat" accurately, and eventually the speech will improve.

The first sounds toddlers begin to master are usually the lip sounds "p, b, m, w." Also, "h" and "n" are early sounds children develop. Sounds in the middle or end of words may be more difficult than beginning sounds. Below are two charts detailing speech sounds development by gender and age.

FEMALE	AGE	Initial Position	Medial Position	Final Position
	2:0 - 2:5		/p/	
	2:6 - 2:11	/m/		
	3:0 - 3:5	/b/ /d/ /k/ /n/ /w/ /h/	/d/ /g/ /m/ /n/ /f/	/p/
	3:6 - 3:11	/f/		/n/
	4:0 - 4:5	/t/ /sp/ /st/	/b/ /k/ /ng/ /z/ /y/	/d/ /k/ /m/ /f/ /v/ /nt/
	4:6 - 4:11	/ch/ /j/ /l/ /y/ /fr/ /gl/ /pl/ /tr/	/ch/ /l/	/b/ /t/ /g/ /sh/ /ch/
	5:0 - 5:11	/p/ /s/ /z/ /sh/ /bl/ /dr/ /kw/ /pr/ /sl/ /sw/	/sh/	/s/ /l/
	6:0 - 6:11	/v/ /r/ /br/ /gr/ /kr/ /th/ (voiced)	/v/ /s/ /j/ /r/ /br/	/er/ /ng/ /z/ /r/
	7:0 - 7:11	/g/ /th/ (voiceless)	/t/ /th/ (voiced)	/th/ (voiceless)
8:0 - 8:11				

MALE	AGE	Initial Position	Medial Position	Final Position
	2:0 - 2:5		/p/	
	2:6 - 2:11	/m/		
	3:0 - 3:5	/b/ /d/ /n/ /f/ /h/	/d/ /g/ /m/ /ng/ /f/	/p/ /n/ /f/
	3:6 - 3:11	/k/ /w/	/n/ /z/ /y/	/b/ /d/ /k/ /m/ /nt/
	4:0 - 4:5	/t/ /kw/	/b/ /k/	/g/ /v/
	4:6 - 4:11	/s/ /sh/ /ch/ /j/	/sh/ /ch/	/t/ /sh/ /ch/
	5:0 - 5:11	/p/ /z/ /l/ /y/ /bl/ /pl/ /sp/ /st/ /sw/	/s/ /l/	/ng/ /z/
	6:0 - 6:11	/g/ /v/ /dr/ /gr/ /gl/ /kr/ /tr/	/r/	
	7:0 - 7:11	/r/ /br/ /fr/ /pr/ /sl/ /th/ (voiced)	/v/	/er/ /l/ /r/
8:0 - 8:11		/t/ /j/ /br/ /th/ (voiced)	/s/ /th/ (voiceless)	
> 8:11	/th/ (voiceless)			

Ages at which 90% of normative sample mastered consonants.

Adapted from Goldman Fristoe Test of Articulation, Third Edition (GFTA-3) 2015