

Go on a 'listening walk': On the way around town/in the garden/around the house, encourage your child to listen to all the different sounds. Ask them if they can guess what it is and point to it.

## When should I get help?

If you are concerned that your child's speech is difficult to understand, speak to your Health Visitor, Doctor, local Children's Centre or your child's pre-school (if they go to one).

## Useful websites:

[www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk](http://www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk)  
[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

Developed by Peterborough  
Speech and Language Therapy  
Children's Centres Team

People can't  
understand what my  
child says...

Ideas for  
helping  
children  
with unclear  
speech



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Babies start making noises from a very early age (not just crying) and it often sounds like they are talking to themselves. Children usually start talking at around 12-18 months and their first words aren't clear, e.g. 'doo' for 'juice'.

Most children follow the same pattern when learning to say the sounds in words. Some sounds are harder to say than others.

By the age of five, children can usually speak clearly. Difficult sounds such as 'r' and 'l' may not be pronounced clearly until they are as old as seven.



## Games that could help your child

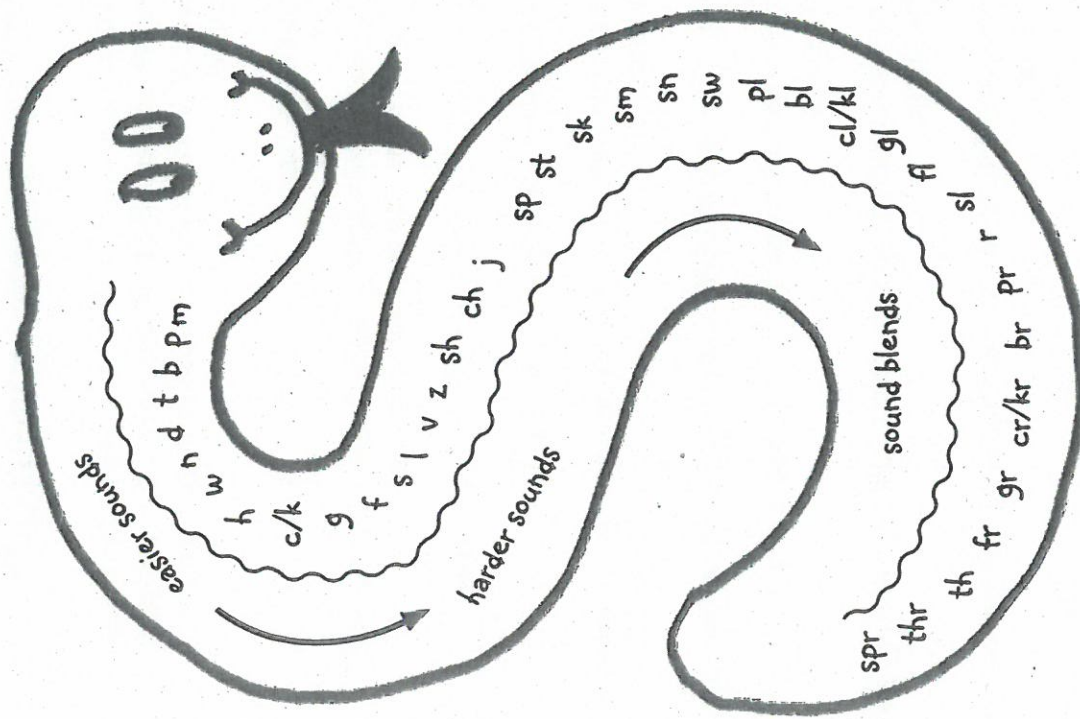
We know that learning to listen helps children's speech so here are some listening games to play.

**Find the animal:** Cut out or draw pictures of animals. Make the animal noises and see if your child can find the right animal. Start by making it easy and only show them one picture at a time. Then increase this to two, then three, then four pictures. You may want to hide the pictures around the room.

**Playing with shakers:** Fill some empty plastic bottles with dried beans, stones or lentils. Shake them quietly, loudly, slowly, fast and talk about it. If you can make pairs of shakers that sound exactly the same, you could play 'copy my sounds'. Set up a screen so that your child can't see which shakers you are using. Make one or two sounds using the same or different shakers and encourage your child to repeat what you did with their own shakers. This could be extended to different household objects and the sounds they make.







## What sounds should my child be able to say first?

Children often learn the sounds of speech in a particular developmental order. Some may have quite clear speech from the beginning. For others the process is slower and some may have difficulties with speech sounds as they approach school age and beyond.

As children begin to talk it is likely that speech won't be very clear. This doesn't matter and it's important that we, as listeners, don't try correcting them. Just repeat the word the child is trying to say clearly for them. By 3½ years of age some of the harder sounds will be developing and the child's speech will be easier to understand by people who know the child well.



## What you can do to help

Playing with something or looking at pictures in a book together means that your child is likely to say things linked to what they are looking at – this will help you to work out what they may be saying.

Try to tune into *what* your child is saying rather than *how* they are saying it. Respond by clearly repeating what your child has said, e.g. 'oh yes, a cat'. This encourages them to talk more. Do this rather than correcting your child or asking them to repeat words they find difficult.

If you really don't understand, try and ask your child to show you or say it in a different way. You could do this by:

- Asking them to repeat what they say whilst facing you. Tell them that talking is sometimes tricky but it will get easier.
- Pointing to or showing you what they want.
- Acting out what they want. If you use gestures while you are talking, they will too.
- Making suggestions if you think you know what they are saying but are not too sure.

## Why don't some children learn to speak clearly?

It is not known why some children find it harder to learn to speak than others. Some things may have affected your child's talking but are often beyond your control. For example:

- Starting to talk late.
- Having lots of colds and/or ear infections, especially in the early years, causing hearing loss.
- Being overactive and having poor concentration.
- Being underactive, especially as a baby.
- Others in the family having speech, language, reading and writing problems.
- Sucking a dummy or bottle a lot after the age of 18 months
- Having a medical condition that affects the use of their muscles.
- Lack of experience of hearing others talking, or being talked and listened to.
- An event in the family which meant the child 'went back to being a baby'.

It is unlikely that your child's unclear speech is caused by laziness, having a parent with a strong accent or learning two languages at once.