

Oxford Craniofacial Unit

COMMUNICATING WITH A CHILD WITH A CLEFT PALATE

Information for parents and carers

Many children with a cleft lip and/or palate develop normal speech and language, but some children might have speech difficulties related to their cleft. Some of these difficulties can be corrected with speech therapy.

When children are very young, they start to learn to use their voice, lips and tongue to make sounds. While children are still learning, they can make some unusual sounds. It is important to know the difference between speech sounds that might be related to the cleft palate and normal sounds children make when they are still learning.

Your child's Speech and Language Therapist can work with you and your child to sort out the difference between cleft-speech sounds and normal 'learning' speech sounds.

Tune into your child's speech

It is really helpful to tune into your child's speech and listen to the way they make their speech sounds and whether they have any speech sounds linked to their cleft palate.

Some children with cleft palate make sounds at the back of their throat, or make some sounds out of their nose. You can work with your child's Speech and Language Therapist to teach them to make sounds in a new, correct way.

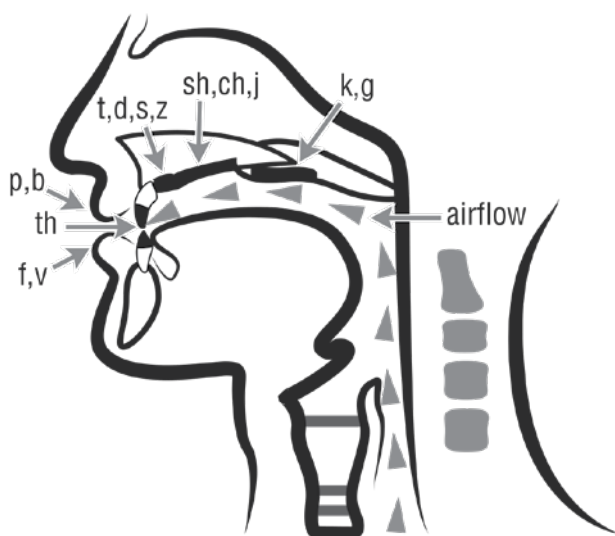
How do we make speech sounds?

Speech sounds begin with air coming up from the lungs, through the voice box and out of the mouth. We shape sounds with our tongue, lips and teeth in order to say sounds and words.

The palate is the soft and hard parts of the roof of the mouth. It plays an important role in speech production, as the soft part closes off the nose from the mouth during speech.

Most sounds produced in English are made with the palate raised (with the nose cavity closed off). These are called 'oral sounds' (p, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, s, z, sh, ch, j).

In addition to this there are three sounds (m, n and ng) where the palate is lowered (the connection between the mouth and the nose is open). These are called 'nasal sounds'.



Babies learn to make sounds like p, b, and m first. Babies begin making speech sound noises in 'babble'. Babble is a normal stage that most children go through, when they try out speech sounds, but aren't necessarily trying to say actual words. You might hear your baby making "mamama" or "bababa" sounds to begin with.

Activity ideas

Your child's Speech and Language Therapist will listen to and discuss your baby's babble sounds with you. They will give you some ideas about how to encourage the movements and sounds needed for speech, as well as the sounds to discourage.

You can help shape your baby's early speech sound and language development by normal 'chatting' and by doing some of the following activities.

Before children can make speech sounds, it is important that they can look, listen and feel sounds first.

Talking to your baby

By chatting to your baby throughout the day, you are giving them an example of speech sounds. Spending time talking to yourself while you go about your daily activities can help your baby to hear you make speech sounds correctly.

As you do activities around the house you can narrate what you are doing (e.g. 'It's time for a bath. I'm going to turn the water on. Splash! Wow, that is cold! Now to add some bubbles!'). You can have fun and use made up sounds. Your baby will like watching your mouth and face and hearing the sounds that you make.

Some ideas:

- Make your voice go up and down in pitch and volume.
- Make funny faces and exaggerate your facial expressions for your baby to watch.
- Make funny sounds (blow raspberries, smack your lips).

Babble with your baby

When you hear your baby make a sound, you can repeat the sound back to them. This lets your baby hear and see the sounds they are making and tune into their own speech sounds. Let your baby see and feel your mouth moving with their hands, or on their skin. For example, blow a raspberry and let your baby touch your lips to feel the vibration.

Be careful not to repeat back any sounds that your baby might back at their back of their throat – these are the sounds your Speech and Language Therapist will work with you to discourage.

Getting ready to play

As your child grows you can start to play with them with words and sounds. The most important thing to remember is to have fun! Children are more likely to want to join in activities if they are enjoying themselves and see you enjoying yourself too.

Keep activities short; very young children are still developing their listening and attention skills and won't be able to concentrate for long.

You can play speech sound games with your child at any time. It is best to find a quiet spot, so your child can hear your voice and speech sounds that are quiet (like 'p'). Try to sit face to face with your child, so they can see your face and mouth.

Turn-taking

One of the first steps in learning about communication is beginning to take turns in conversation. You can do this with your child by letting them make some sounds, then saying something, then pausing to allow your child to take their turn again.

Learning to listen

You can teach your child to tune in to the speech sounds and noises they hear. You can do this by going on a listening walk and pointing out the sounds that you hear (e.g. birds in the tree, dog parking, bus beeping).

When you are at home, you can point out sounds like the telephone or the vacuum cleaner. You can ask, 'What's that noise?' then show them what made the noise. Toys that make a sound, like musical instruments, shakers and rattles, are also useful for teaching your child to listen.

Change the sound of your voice

When you make sounds, change the pitch and tune in your voice, so that your child can listen and copy. You can make this fun by doing this in play.

For example, when you swing or bounce your child up and down, vary the tune in your voice to match the word, so your voice goes up when you say 'up' and down with 'down'.

Starting talking

Encourage your baby to make sounds. Babies at an early age usually won't be able to copy sounds perfectly. It is more important for you to provide a clear example of the sound and this will encourage your child to join in.

Teach new sounds

Encourage early speech sounds, particularly gentle lip sounds such as "muh, buh, puh". Use words like "peep-o", "pop!" and "mummy" or "daddy", or imitate animal sounds, for example, "moo", "baa" and "miaow".

You can also make up nonsense strings of sounds, for example 'mumumum' or 'boobooboo'. If you make the sounds, your baby will want to join in.

Pop bubbles while saying 'pop, pop, pop' and play hiding games, saying 'peep-o'.

Further advice

If you have any concerns or questions about your child's communication development, please speak to their Speech and Language Therapist.



If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

Author: Sarah Kilcoyne, Principal Specialist Speech and Language Therapist
August 2018
Review: August 2021
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information

