

Difficulty Moving and Using the Tongue Muscles (Oro – Motor Skills)

Difficulty moving and using the muscles of their mouth (oro-motor skills) is the most probable explanation for children who are messy eaters, who dribble, whose talking is unclear or whose speech is not understood by people outside the immediate family.

The ability to move and co-ordinate the mouth muscles (lips/tongue/palate) and breathing to produce speech influences the clarity of speech produced (articulation) and can result in a child drooling.

A child's learning to say their sounds correctly can have an impact on social interaction as well as future schooling. Children who don't say their sounds clearly may not be easily understood by others and are more likely to attract the attention of a bully.

'Sloppy' talking (poor articulation) can also compromise spelling skills as children may attempt to write the word the way they are saying it – e.g. if a child has difficulty saying the 'r' sound they may write the word 'red' as "wed" which creates a very different word).

All children will go through some sound error patterns (i.e. mispronunciation of sounds) as they are learning to talk, but these should disappear by certain ages. For most children, their speech should be easily understood by most listeners between the ages of 3 and 4 years (for more information on specific ages please contact a Speech Therapist). But some kids need extra help to get over the hurdle to good mouth control for talking and eating.

What can I do to improve my child's oro-motor skills?

Activities to develop tongue skills

In these activities it is the tongue that is supposed to be doing the work. You may need to gently hold the child's head so that they do not turn their head but rather they move their tongue.

- Try licking '100s and 1000s' from a plate using the tongue tip.
- Hold a lolly or ice cube a distance in front of the child and encourage them to stick their tongue right out in order to lick it. *(Check if your child has a tongue tie. If yes, contact your doctor immediately for corrective procedures).*
- Look at yourself sticking out your tongue in the mirror.
- Move the tongue from side to side both inside and outside of the mouth.
 - To move the tongue inside the mouth, encourage your child to push out their cheeks using their tongue.

- To move the tongue from side to side outside the mouth encourage your child to place their tongue in one corner of their mouth and then move it to the other corner.
- Place food items (e.g. cake, sliced cucumber, sliced carrots, sliced cheese) on the cheek, just to the left or right of the lips, under the nose or under the bottom lip, near the chin and encourage your child to use their tongue to lick the food off.
- Lick up and try to touch your nose with your tongue – use a mirror if this helps.
- Put something sticky (e.g. jam, hummus, soft cheese spread) in a shallow container, such as an egg cup, and then try and lick it clean.

Activities to develop lip skills

- Practice making lips into a kissing shape in the mirror. Practice moving from a stretched 'ee' position to a rounded 'oo' position. Repeat this several times.
- Apply lipstick and make different shaped lip-prints on paper (e.g. small circles, big circles, stretched out smile shapes).
- Make bubbles by blowing through a straw into a glass of water.
- Play blow football with straws and polystyrene balls. Set up a goal with duplo or 2 glasses and use the straw to blow the ball between for a goal.
- Use whistles, party blowers to practice blowing. Make sure your child holds the instruments with the lips, not teeth.

Activities to develop tongue and lip skills when making sounds

- Practice moving from one lip position to another in sequence whilst making the sound 'oo' and then 'ee' (e.g. oo ee oo ee oo ee).
- Try saying the same sound five to eight times, slowly at first, and then faster if possible (e.g. ppppp, ttttt, kkkkk).
- Try sequencing sounds together that use the lips and then use the tongue (e.g. p – t – k, p – t – k, p – t – k). Once your child can do one set, try and see if they can do 4 or 5 sets.
- Draw a ladder or make a ladder out of masking tape on the carpet. Get your child to make a sequence of two or three of the sounds (e.g. p – t – k; b – d – g; f – s – sh) as they 'walk' a toy character up each rung of the ladder.
- Make stepping stones. Put a sequence of letters or symbols on the stepping stones. Get your child to make the correct sound as they step on each stone.

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Shape Sorter

Why is a “shape sorter” so useful!

The answer lies in the assortment of shapes, colours, physical and visual skills that it offers all in the one box.

With this simple toy your child can:

- match a shape to the correct hole on a shape sorter cube and let each piece drop into the hole
- open the lid to tip the block out and start all over again
- sort all the green blocks together regardless of shape
- sort all the round blocks together regardless of colour

The shape sorter allows your child to strengthen their hand-eye coordination, fine motor and problem-solving skills, as well develop their vocabulary knowledge (e.g. being able to identify and name shapes).

Tips to making the most of the shape sorter include:

- **Understanding/recognising shapes:** Hide the shapes around the room and ask your child to find a particular shape.
- **Naming shapes:** Encourage your child to name a shape before placing it in the sorter.
- **Turn taking:** Encourage your child to take turns in placing shapes into the sorter and talk about whose turn it is (e.g. “My turn”, “Your turn”).
- **Commenting:** Talk about what happens when your child has chosen a shape to place into the sorter (e.g. “It doesn’t fit. Let’s try another hole” when the shape doesn’t match the selected hole; “Whoosh. It fell in!” when the shape falls through the correct hole).
- **Requesting:** Give your child the shape sorter cube and place the shapes in front of them. Encourage your child to ask for the shape that they want before providing it to them (e.g. ‘I want the circle/square/triangle please’).
- **Problem solving:** When your child has difficulty placing a shape in the correct hole, encourage them to try again and give them tips if they have trouble placing the shape appropriately into the hole (e.g. “That’s the right hole! Turn the shape around. Now it fits!”).
- **Counting:** Encourage counting skills by asking your child to count the blocks.

- **Following instructions:** Place the shapes next to the shaper sorter. Ask your child to place specific shapes into the sorter. Give them an instruction to follow depending on their skill level (i.e. One level instructions such as “Find the **circle**”; 2 step instructions such as “Find the **circle** and the **square**”). Once your child is familiar with both shapes and colours, encourage them to find a specific coloured shape (e.g. “Show me the **blue square**”). Also, you can take it in turns to give each other instructions so that your child starts to learn about turn taking and joint interactions.
- **Concepts including:**
 - **in/out/on:** Get your child to place a specific shape in relation to the sorter (e.g. “Put the circle **in/on** the cube”, “Take the circle **out** of the cube”).
 - **same/different:** During play, model the concepts same/different when comparing two shapes (e.g. “I have two circles. They are the **same** shape”; “You have a triangle and a circle. They are **different** shapes”) or comparing colours (e.g. “I have a blue circle and blue triangle. They are the **same** colour”; “I have a blue circle and red triangle. They are **different** colours”).
 - **colours:** Develop your child’s understanding of colours. Encourage them to group items that are the same colour (e.g. **yellow/blue** shapes).

How is this toy helpful?

Using the fun ideas above, the “shape sorter” can teach children to improve their play, social interactions, turn-taking, attention and listening, understanding and use of language and fine motor skills.

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Moving About During Reading Time

Does your child struggle to sit long enough to read books alone or with you?

Moving about when reading can keep kids turning the page. Here are a few ideas to try:

- Use physical activity between pages – try doing 10 star jumps every time you turn the page!
- Play “Simon Says” (doing just one activity between each page).
- ‘Race’ up the hallway or see how fast your child can do star jumps at the end of each page.
- Before you begin reading, agree upon a reward for finishing the book.
- Read while hanging on the monkey bars or while they are hanging over the back of the couch.
- Build a fort, snuggle up and read together.
- Ask your child to turn the pages – this way they can set the pace.
- Talk about the pictures as you turn each page so you can enjoy the story instead of focusing on the reading.
- Invent funny voices for each of the characters. Turn the words into a funny tune and don’t be afraid to use different sound effects to keep your child engaged.

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Practicing Pronouns

When children mix up their words, it's often cute to those who know them well, but confusing to those who don't know what they mean. Language mix-ups are part of learning, but some kids get 'stuck' with a mix-up.

Common pronoun confusions to look out for include:

- "me don't want to" instead of "I don't want to"
- "me going" instead of "I'm going"
- "me want that" instead of "I want that"
- "he's playing a game" instead of "she's playing a game"
- "him hurt himself" instead of "he hurt himself"

To help your child get their pronouns right, we recommend:

- Modelling the correct use of pronouns in spoken sentences when your child produces an error (e.g. turn "me want to do it" into "I want to do it").
- Praising your child when they use the correct pronoun (e.g. Wow, I like how you fixed up 'she' without me telling you).
- Being specific when praising your child for fixing an error up by themselves. This will show the child the exact part you are praising him for so he knows next time.
- Providing a good model for your child by using pronouns during conversation and games.
- Using pronouns when describing pictures in storybooks or making up stories (e.g. "look, she is jumping").

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Lisps

What is Lisps?

Lisps (not saying the 's' sound accurately) are really cute until your child is 4 and a half years old and starting to socialise more. By then, lisps can start to impact:

- Ability to be understood
- Confidence when interacting with peers
- Sharing during group time at school
- Ability to sound out words for spelling
- Confidence in sharing their opinions

Here are some simple tips and tricks to get your child saying the "s" sound to eliminate the lisp:

- Praise your child when they correct their own speech without you needing to remind them (e.g. "Hey I liked the way you fixed up sock. First you said *thock* and then you fixed it up all by yourself and said *sock*! Well done for fixing it up without me telling you!")
- Be specific when praising your child for fixing up their own speech. Say, "I like the way you said *sock* with a good /s/ sound at the beginning." This will help to draw their attention to exactly what they have said and hopefully increase their awareness in general conversation.
- Draw your child's attention to the target sound in words that they are exposed to in everyday situations/activities. For example, "Look, there is your sock. It starts with a /s/ sound. **Sock**".
- Model back what your child has said the correct way without asking them to repeat the word again. Asking them to constantly repeat themselves becomes frustrating for everyone (e.g.. Child: "A tat!" Adult: "Yes, it's a cat. **Cat**").
- When you notice you have modelled back what the child has said the correct way, remember to do it again with the same sound or word four or five times later on the same day.

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