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## **The Early Bird Catches The WORD!**

### **Information Sheet No. 6**

*Sixth in a series of information sheets on children's communication difficulties aimed at health and education professionals, parents and caregivers.*

#### **"When should I refer a child to a speech pathologist?"**

This is a frequently asked question by both parents and health professionals. The argument against early referral usually revolves around the feeling that children may just grow out of their speech or language problem, or they are too young to withstand the formality of regular speech and language therapy.

Clinicians and researchers around the world, believe that early referral of children with speech and language problems is the best and most ethical course to follow. Whilst it is true that some speech/language problems may sometimes improve with time, such as lisps and other minor sound substitutions, many speech/language problems do not. Early treatment can help children overcome the frustration, lack of self-confidence, and other social and emotional issues that might develop due to their poor communication skills. Early assessment and treatment can reduce the risk of reading, spelling and writing problems and can also help to identify children with other developmental problems. Remediation programs, such as early intervention programs, therefore can start as soon as possible, as can referrals to other health professionals, such as paediatricians, for further assessment.

#### **When to refer?**

- Any child by **24** months of age with less than **30** single words and **no 2-3 word utterances**, should be seen by a speech pathologist.
- Any child from **2** years of age who has been **stuttering** for more than a few months should be seen.
- Any child by **3** years of age who is not using **at least 3-4 word utterances** should be seen.
- Any child by **4** years of age whose speech is **difficult to understand** should be seen.
- A child of **any age who is frustrated, embarrassed, or self conscious because of their speech difficulties** should be seen.
- A child of any age who has **difficulty understanding you or following directions** is of concern.
- A recent survey in this clinic found that over 90% of children referred for a speech/language assessment needed speech/language therapy intervention to assist with their communication development.

#### **What happens in speech pathology?**

**First;** going to a speech pathologist, for an assessment or therapy, should be **FUN** for the child, especially when we are talking about very young children. We know that learning occurs when children are *interested* and they are *enjoying* themselves. Therefore, most speech pathologists who see young children work very hard at keeping the sessions *fun*, whilst maintaining the goals of therapy. "But my 2-year-old child will not sit down on a chair at the table." Perhaps not! So...we do our therapy on the floor!

**Mums and Dads;** stay in the room at all times. Parents need to see what's going on in order to practise effectively at home, and without a doubt – **practice is vital!** So, with active parent involvement, fun and stimulating activities, up-to-date and evidence-based speech pathology programs, children will be receiving some of the best treatment we have to offer. The "wait-and-see" approach is no longer acceptable with our current knowledge. Remember: **EARLY ASSESSMENT IS VITAL.**

NB: The information contained herein is not advice. It is general information for adults on children's communication development. It is not intended to be used as a sole means of identifying children with communication difficulties. Advice from a qualified paediatric Speech Pathologist is recommended.  
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