



**Translational Centre  
for Speech Disorders**  
Centre of Research Excellence



# Articulation disorder

## Fact Sheet – Speech Disorders

Articulation refers to the way we make speech sounds. To make sounds we coordinate movements of the lips, tongue, teeth, palate, and lungs. Many different nerves and muscles work together to articulate sounds for speech.

Children with an articulation disorder have difficulty forming particular speech sounds properly.

### What are the signs articulation disorder?

Common examples of speech errors<sup>#</sup> seen in articulation disorders are:

- Lisps, including:
  - Interdental lisp: where the 's' sound is produced like a 'th' sound
  - Lateral lisp: where air escapes from the sides of the tongue creating a 'slushy' sound
- Difficulty producing the 'r' sound, so 'rabbit' may sound like 'wabbit'<sup>\*</sup>
- Difficulty producing the 'th' sound, so 'three' may sound like 'free'<sup>^\*</sup>
- Children with cleft lip/palate may use speech errors that compensate for the change in oral structure e.g., air may escape from their nose instead of their mouth.

<sup>#</sup>Examples listed relate to sounds of English. Articulation errors may vary depending on the sounds of the language spoken.

<sup>\*</sup> 'w' for 'r' and 'f' for 'th' are also examples of 'phonological delay', which is a different speech diagnosis. An SP will test to see if the child can produce the sound of interest and whether they understand the speech sound patterns (phonology) of their language.

<sup>^</sup> This pattern is acceptable in some regional dialects in some regions in the UK

### What causes articulation disorder?

There are two main types of articulation disorder:

- **Structural disorder:** where a child's oral or facial structures make it difficult for them to make sound(s) correctly (e.g., cleft lip/palate, overbite/underbite, tongue overgrowth condition).
- **Functional disorder:** where a child is unable to make sound(s) correctly but there is no clear cause (e.g., no hearing impairment, no oral/facial structural issues). Instead, a child may have mis-learned a pattern for making a speech sound (e.g., lisp).

Regardless of the cause, your child's speech therapist will be able to assist with the recommended treatment.

### How is articulation disorder diagnosed?

Qualified speech pathologists (SPs) (also known as speech-language pathologists, SLPs, or speech therapists) assess children's speech difficulties to determine whether they are a result of an articulation disorder, another type of speech disorder (e.g., phonological disorder), or a combination of speech sound disorders.

Assessments usually involve observing the child's oral structures at rest and during movement, and



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examining speech by naming pictures which are designed to elicit all the sounds of the child's language.

Sometimes articulation errors can be confused for phonological errors. Phonological errors might sound the same, but they are treated differently. Phonological errors usually occur in a patterned way, but the sounds will be 'stimulable' in isolation (i.e., the sound can be said by itself). For example, a child may say "wabbit" for rabbit. If they are able to say the "r" sound by itself or after an example, this is more likely to be a phonological delay. If they cannot say the sound by itself or after a model, this is more likely to be an articulation disorder. Your SP will perform a number of 'talking tests' to form a diagnosis.

### How is articulation disorder treated?

Treatment may include regular appointments and exercises for you to do with your child at home. Traditional articulation therapy is usually very effective. With appropriate speech therapy, many children with articulation disorders will have improvement in their speech.

***In some children, articulation disorder may be due to a structural problem, but in most children, there is no known cause.***

***Regardless of the cause, your child's speech pathologist will be able to assist with the recommended treatment.***

### References

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