

Speech Pathology helps with reading and spelling difficulties

I have written before about people who may have phonological awareness deficits resulting in reading and spelling difficulties. It is now widely accepted by most schools that a phonological awareness delay or disorder can be contributing to children's literacy difficulties at school.

The good news is that phonological awareness difficulties can be picked up in the second half of pre-school and treated by speech pathologists before children commence school and start a cycle of failure.

Who is the best person to help my child?

Speech Pathologists' training in phonetics, phonology, and metalinguistic skills provide them with the most appropriate background for treating such children with phonological awareness deficits. They also have specific training in sound awareness due to their work with children who have articulation disorders (Catts, 1991). Assessment and diagnosis of phonological awareness disorder is a specialised field as general language, phonological awareness, and auditory discrimination must be examined. It is frequently the case that children have been identified, within the school, as having reading and literacy deficits, but it is the Speech Pathologist who can provide the differential diagnosis for this specific literacy disorder.

What is phonological awareness?

Intact phonological awareness skills allow a child to break words up into their

constituent sounds and then to consciously manipulate these structures. It also allows the development of segmenting spoken words into sounds for spelling and the blending of spoken sounds into words for reading.

A recent shift is starting to become evident in many schools around Australia. The major theoretical framework that teachers have been working under for the last 20 years or so, has been the 'whole language' approach where children are immersed in language and taught to read via the whole word (sightwords) approach.

Under this theory, children were not usually taught the underlying phonological awareness skills that need to be in place by Grade 1 to ensure successful acquisition of reading and spelling. Skills such as teaching a child how to rhyme (including the characteristics of rhyme, rhyme judgement and rhyme creation), breaking words up into syllables or beats, breaking words up into their individual sounds, telling you what sound the word starts with, telling you what sound the word ends with, being able to blend individual sounds to make a word, identifying and creating words that start or end with the same sound, etc. Children need to be able to perform all of these tasks at the spoken word level.

These phonological awareness skills are different to the phonics skills taught in Grade 1. They should be in place and taught before the child receives phonics tuition.

It is now recognised that for children to become successful readers and spellers they need more than the whole language approach. They need to be taught both (a) a vocabulary of core sight words and (b) underlying phonological awareness skills.

Unfortunately many of the teachers teaching in our schools today were not given any training on phonological awareness skills because they were being taught the



principles of the whole language approach.

In an effort to work with teachers to assist children with literacy difficulties to achieve their potential, Tyquin Group Speech Pathology has been running seminars on phonological awareness for teachers since July 2000. To date, 250 teachers have participated in over eight seminars on phonological awareness, giving them information on what it is, how they can identify children with phonological awareness difficulties in their class so they can refer on for a full speech pathology assessment and treatment.

Treatment:

Tyquin Group Speech Pathology offers a literacy programme called the Sound Training Activities for Reading & Spelling (STARS) Programme. The STARS programmes cater for children in pre-school and all grades at primary school and beyond. Adults have even successfully completed these programmes. The STARS programmes are offered in the following forms:

- The Sound Training Activities for Reading Readiness (STARRS) Programme is a phonological awareness programme for pre-school and Grade 1 children with an initial programme of 10 – 12 sessions conducted by Tyquin Group Speech Pathology. This programme has a greater concentration on sound training and does not extend into spelling and reading. It is designed to prepare these children for reading and spelling, and to prevent, rather than overcome, some literacy difficulties.
- The Sound Training Activities for Reading & Spelling (STARS) Basic Programme is a phonological awareness programme for school aged children with an initial programme of 10 sessions conducted by Tyquin Group Speech Pathology. The primary focus is upon rhyming, syllable segmentation and identification and sound training. Then work is done with regards to changing sounds into letters for reading and spelling.
- The Intermediate Programme builds upon the skills learned in the STARS Basic Programme. The programme consists of 8 sessions usually conducted weekly. It is designed to teach the children how to use the skills learned in the context of

reading and spelling.

- The Sound Training Activities for Reading & Spelling 'Advanced' Programme is a more advanced programme for older students and adults who have completed the Basic and Intermediate programmes and require greater in depth help in the areas of reading and spelling, rather than specific phonological awareness skills. The programme consists of 6 sessions, again usually conducted weekly.

Statistics have been collected on people who have successfully completed the STARS Basic Programme.