

CHILDREN WHO HAVE LITERACY PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL

Speech Pathology casenotes by Louise Tyquin

In the last edition of Woman & Child we discussed Sammy (3½ years) who had developed a stutter. Upon assessment, it was found that Sammy's dysfluencies were causing disruption in the smooth flow of speech to the extent that it interfered with effective communication and was causing distress to Sammy.

Today we will be discussing a boy called Jason, who is in Year 3 at school and is having difficulties with reading and spelling.

Mum's concern:

Jason was brought to the clinic by his mother upon the advice of his teacher. It was noted that Jason had no previous history of speech and language problems, and his hearing was assessed to be within normal limits. Jason's reading age, as tested by his classroom teacher, was at a Year 1 level. He also displayed difficulties in spelling (e.g. 'went' was spelled as 'wetn').

Assessment:

Jason was assessed using a battery of language and literacy tests. This assessment included examination of Jason's skills in the areas of general language, phonological awareness and auditory discrimination. It was revealed that Jason's difficulties in acquiring sound literacy skills were not language-based problems and Jason was diagnosed as having phonological awareness disorder. Frequently, children are identified within schools as having literacy problems, but a speech pathologist provides the specific diagnosis for this type of literacy disorder.

The problem:

Phonological awareness is a metalinguistic skill which relates to an awareness that words can be segmented into syllables and phonemes (individual sounds) which can then be manipulated and blended to create new words. This requires knowledge about concepts such as rhyme and alliteration (recognising and creating words that begin with the same sound), the ability to use language to learn about language and the ability to think about what makes up our language (e.g. sounds, words, sentences, etc.).

Children with these *phonological awareness* deficits experience difficulty therefore, in segmenting, manipulating and blending words and sounds of both spoken and written language. These abilities are necessary if the child is to be able to recognise sound structures in order to read aloud, and sound out unfamiliar words in order to spell them out.

Due to this close relationship between these skills and literacy, difficulties in phonological awareness have been reliably linked to early reading and spelling difficulties. In fact, a relationship appears to exist between phonological awareness deficits and reading accuracy

(reading aloud) and spelling but not reading comprehension.

This may be because decreased phonological awareness may hinder the student's progression from the logographic (symbolic, visual) to the alphabetical stage of literacy. Therefore, the child with phonological awareness deficits may achieve word recognition and comprehension via the visual route as a compensatory measure. This can result in spelling errors that are based on incorrectly remembered word forms rather than errors in sound structures, as was the case with Jason, spelling the word 'went' as 'wetn'.

What to do:

Speech Pathologists' training in phonetics, phonology and metalinguistic skills provide them with the most appropriate background for treating children with phonological awareness deficits. They also have specific training in sound awareness due to their work with children who have articulation disorders. Speech pathology treatment programmes are based on increased sound awareness of sound structures through auditory discrimination training; rhyme recognition, identification and creation; alliteration skills; development of segmentation, manipulation and blending skills with both syllables and individual phonemes; discussions to raise the metalinguistic ability to use language to learn about language; and letter-sound conversions.

Tyquin Group Speech Pathology offers the Sound Training Activities for Reading & Spelling (STARS) Programme in the following forms:

STARR – The Sound Training Activities for Reading & Spelling Readiness Programme is designed for those children who are Pre-School, Grade 1 and Grade 2. The programme has a greater concentration on sound training, and does not extend as far into spelling and reading. It is designed to prepare these children for reading & spelling, and to prevent rather than overcome, some literacy difficulties.

STARS – BASIC – This programme is for school-aged and above as an initial programme of 10 sessions. The primary concentration is upon sound training, and then work is done with regard to converting sounds into letters for reading and spelling.

STARS – REFRESHER – This is a follow up programme to be completed approximately 3 months after the completion of the Basic Programme. This is designed to ensure maintenance of the skills learned in BASIC.

STARS – INTERMEDIATE - This programme builds upon the skills learned in BASIC. It consists of 8 sessions and teaches the children to use the skills learned in the context of reading and spelling.

STARS – ADVANCED – This more advanced programme is for older students who have completed BASIC and require greater in depth help in the specific areas of reading and spelling, rather than the phonological skills.



children who have this specific literacy disorder, which is based on phonological awareness deficits. Early intervention in this disorder can assist in the avoidance of future literacy problems and therapy has been shown to be effective in alleviating some long standing literacy difficulties. If you are at all concerned about your child's literacy problems, please do not hesitate to call us regarding your concerns.