

WHEN IS A SPEECH DIFFICULTY NOT REALLY A SPEECH DIFFICULTY

Identifying that your child is having difficulties understanding what you are saying, is not as easy as it may sound. I have recently seen a handful of 4 and 5 year old children who were referred because parents and teachers found that the child was difficult to understand. When I hear the words 'difficult to understand' I immediately suspect that the child is having difficulties pronouncing sounds and so I get ready to assess the child's articulation (sound production).

However when this child arrived at my clinic, I knew within minutes that it was not the articulation that was the main concern, but instead it was the child's comprehension of language. Some people may ask, "How could you confuse Articulation (speech) and Language (comprehension and expression).

The answer is, with some children it is quite easy for the untrained person to be confused because it is often not clear cut. Let's take a look at a case:

PRESENTATION

Claire presented to the clinic as a delightful 4 year old girl. Her parents expressed concern that when she became excited nobody could understand her. This was affecting her ability to socialize successfully with the other children at kindy.

ASSESSMENT

As the therapist was settling Claire and her parents into the clinic the therapist noted two very important things:

1. Her articulation (speech) was pretty good. There seemed to be one or two immature sound substitutions but no real difficulties in understanding her.
2. Claire did not respond in the usual way to my social questions of 'How are you today?' and ensuing questions of 'Would you like to play with the toys or draw a picture', all of which I would expect a 4 year old to respond to.

In fact it appeared that Claire ignored my question and just started talking to no one in particular, commenting on things she saw in my room. Claire's parents did not see anything unusual in this. Immediately I suspected that Claire had responded in this way because she did not understand the question that I asked her. However Claire did know that I had stopped talking and was looking at her meaning that it must have been her turn to speak. Because she did not understand what I had asked her Claire began to talk about what she thought I might have asked. However what she actually said did not have any relevance to the question I had asked.

When this happens in a real life situation (ie someone responding inappropriately) the person who asked the question becomes very confused. That person may try and clarify what was said, however in most cases the conversation would usually just come to a dead end. When this happens consistently the listener can become so confused whenever he/she talks to the child that they perceive that the child is 'difficult to understand'. Difficult to understand - not in the usual sense of mispronouncing sounds but - difficult to understand because she is not answering your question and talking what seems to you to be 'gobblydeegook'.

It was obvious that a language assessment was needed to objectively examine Claire's ability to understand instructions and formulate grammatically correct sentences using age appropriate vocabulary.

RESULTS

Results revealed that Claire was in fact having severe difficulties comprehending sentences.

When asked to 'Point to either the dog or the bird' Claire pointed to the bird. Analysis of her responses led me to believe that Claire would understand the first couple of words I said or the last word but could not understand the full instruction. Claire also had difficulties understanding concepts eg 'Point to the one that is empty'. Claire pointed to the wrong picture.

Claire also had expressive language difficulties, unable to repeat sentences of 4 words or more eg when asked to repeat 'I can carry it', Claire repeated 'I carry it'. Claire also had grammatical difficulties with prepositions, pronouns and word endings eg said 'him bike' for 'her bike'.

Assessment of Claire's articulation revealed four sound substitutions indicating a mild delay. **As it turns out Claire's main difficulty was not with articulation as first thought but with language.**

TREATMENT

Weekly therapy has focused on three areas:

- Comprehension of language. Each week a different structure would be explained and then practised until Claire achieved it correctly eg learning to respond accurately to the instruction 'Point to the ball and the bat'.
- Using a particular grammatical structure (eg pronouns-learning to use 'he and she' and 'her and him' correctly)
- Expanding Claire's expressive vocabulary eg looking at different groups such as fruit, vegetables, clothes and then learning the correct name for individual items within that group like apple, carrot or dress.

Claire is loving therapy and making significant improvements.

Sometimes your child's difficulty may be more than what you first think!