

Phonological Speech Processes

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What are phonological speech processes?

Phonological processes are the speech patterns that toddlers and young children use while trying to produce adult speech. Early in their speech development, all children use some of these processes. For example, many twelve month olds might say “baba” for “bottle.” These children may be able to articulate the “t” sound in their babble clearly, but when they produce the 2-syllable word “bottle” they reduplicate the first syllable “ba.” These children are exhibiting an age-appropriate phonological process. As a child’s speech and language matures, they stop using these processes. In some cases, a child may continue using phonological processes, and may need extra help from a speech therapist to increase speech intelligibility (speech clarity).

What are some common phonological speech processes?

Almost all children under the age of three years old have at least some of the following phonological speech processes in their speech:

- ✚ Assimilation: This is reduplicating speech sounds in words. (For example “cuck” for “cup”).
- ✚ Fronting: A child may produce sounds in words in the front of their mouth. (“do!” for “go!” is an example of fronting).
- ✚ Gliding: Most toddlers and young children have trouble with producing their r and l sounds. They probably use gliding. (A common example is “wike” for “like”).
- ✚ Weak Syllable Deletion: This is when a child only produces one syllable in a two-syllable word (An example might be “bwo” for “broken”).
- ✚ Stopping: This is when a child replaces certain speech sounds with other sounds that speech therapists call “stop sounds.” (“dat” for “that” is an example of stopping).
- ✚ Cluster Reduction: Often, toddlers have difficulty with consonant clusters. A toddler may say “bue” for “blue” for instance.

Other phonological processes include Final Consonant Deletion (leaving the final sounds off words), Initial Consonant Deletion (leaving the initial sounds off words), addition (adding sounds to words), and voicing errors.

If my child under the age of three has some phonological speech processes, is my child's speech delayed?

This depends. Almost all toddlers exhibit some phonological speech processes. Typically, age norms for outgrowing specific phonological processes are older

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than 3 years of age. However, when the combination of multiple phonological processes greatly reduces a child's speech intelligibility, the child may have a phonological speech delay. If by the age of two, the child's speech intelligibility is less than 50% to a listener who is not yet familiar with the child's speech, the child likely has a phonological speech delay. If a child's speech clarity is greatly affected by multiple phonological processes, the child may benefit from early intervention to help reduce these processes.

OK, so what can we do to improve my child's speech?

- ✚ Encourage your child to make verbal choices that require distinction between speech sounds in words, for example: "Should we give the dog a bone or a boat?" In answering this question, the child's awareness to the final sound in the word may be increased. This may help reduce final consonant deletion, assimilation, and other phonological processes such as fronting.
- ✚ When reading to your child, consider using books that play on words and highlight awareness of the speech sounds in words. Consider repetitive, predictable books in which your child can anticipate a word and say it for you.
- ✚ Finger cues are a great way to emphasize particular sounds in words—particularly in reminding children to produce those final sounds or reduce assimilation in 2-syllable words. Ask your speech therapist for specific finger cues. Running your finger across your mouth for the "m" sound, or tapping your lips for "p" and "b" are examples of finger cues.
- ✚ Art projects are a good way to keep a child sitting and focused on the language activity. Require your child to make verbal requests for the art materials they want to use. You can choose materials that highlight final speech sounds (example: "Should we paint the can or the cat?").