

TIP SHEET

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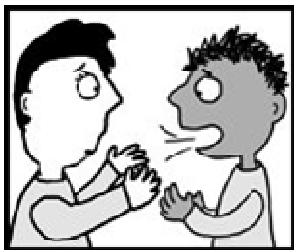


The advice given on this tip sheet is by Lucia Smith, Speech Pathologist.

It is based on experience from her clinical work along with her work consulting with teachers and parents.

It is difficult to address all children's communication styles in a single tip sheet.

If you are concerned about your child's speech or language development, please see a speech pathologist.



Free from www.pelican-talk.com

12 TIPS FOR HELPING A CHILD WHO IS VERY HARD TO UNDERSTAND

This tip sheet is written to assist children who have intact understanding of language but whose speech is almost impossible to understand. We can say that these children are largely **unintelligible**.

Of course, it is normal for very young children (around two years) to have many errors in their speech, but usually their sentence length is not very long and they tend to talk about the "here and now" (in context). For this reason, we can usually figure out what they are saying.

When children get older, however, their sentence length increases and they begin to talk about things that are not in the immediate context. This can be a very difficult and frustrating time for children who have limited intelligibility.

It is said that an unfamiliar person should be able to understand everything that a four year-old says in their spontaneous speech (Pascoe, 2005).

Unfortunately, some children still have high levels of unintelligibility even at school-age. Reasons range from the child having dyspraxia, cerebral palsy or severe phonological impairment. Not being understood can affect every realm of a child's life, from building friendships to explaining that they have a tummy ache. Sadly, these children can become very frustrated and behavioral difficulties such as withdrawal, aggression and even toileting issues are not uncommon. Many children take on a role of the "passive communicator", heavily relying on others' questions and others to anticipate their needs. They initiate very little communication as they do not see themselves capable of clear expression. This dip in confidence can adversely affect the development of speech even further.

For this reason, it is of utmost importance that unintelligibility is taken seriously. Increasing a child's confidence does not come about by pretending you can understand them. Children will very quickly wise up to an adult nodding "yes, oh lovely, yes" while pretending to follow a story. (This tactic is, in fact, highly discouraged. You may unknowingly comment "How lovely" as the child explains they have squashed the neighbour's guinea pig with their scooter!) Over the page are 10 tips to more appropriate ways to help foster a child's self-esteem while helping them to communicate. But first...

The first two steps to help an unintelligible child are:

1. Make sure the child has a full audiological assessment that includes tympanometry (this measures the functioning of the middle ear).
2. Consult a speech pathologist and then follow through with the recommendations. To change any speech habit, practice needs to be

consistent and often it needs to be intensive. It is a challenge to keep practice fun and interesting, but it just has to be done. You don't give up on encouraging a child to use the toilet when toilet-training, so don't give up on speech practice! It may be hard work reaching the goal, but you must keep at it.

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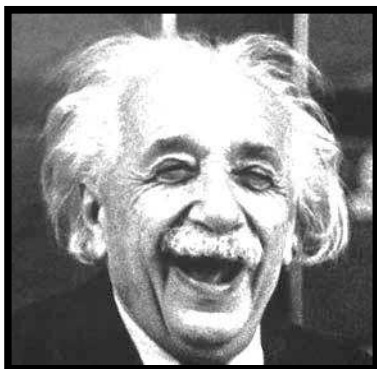


ALL people who the child interacts with on a regular basis should be aware of how to help the child who is hard to understand. (Give them a copy of this Pelican Talk tip sheet). There may also be some specific strategies that the child's speech pathologist recommends. These can be added to the end of this document.

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND HONESTY Often people fall into the trap pretending that they understand what a child is saying. Children quickly wise up to this, and it is not recommended. I have also know people who put the onus back on themselves. For example, "Oooh, sorry , I'm a bit old and deaf, I didn't understand... can you say it again?" Again, this may work occasionally, but it's not being honest and if this is overused, again the child will wise up. (Why are there so many people who are trouble hearing round here?!) The other problem is that the child may only repeat the same unintelligible phrase, only louder, thus, not really helping the listener understand.

The truth is, the child knows they are hard to understand. Treat the issue with sensitivity and kindness. Without saying it, you can acknowledge the problem by saying something like; *"Sorry mate, I didn't get that... can you say it another way?"* If the child looks frustrated by this and tries to "give up" on telling you, encourage them not to. Show you are interested and prepared to wait while they try and get their message across. Of course, there will come a point, that if the message is not able to be deciphered, you may have to say something like "It's tough when it's to talk...." and at this point, depending on the urgency of the matter, you may divert the child's thinking by talking about something in the here and now (using a yes/ no or choice question so you know that the response will be easier to follow. See Tip 10).

When it comes to acknowledgement of difficult speech, someone who is close to the child (parent or a familiar speech pathologist) should have a chat with the child about their difficulty. Children can become very depressed about their speech and about themselves in general. It's importance to stress that they are not silly, and that they are good at other things like sport/drawing/being a good brother etc...



Sometimes I use a picture of Einstein and explain to a child that this man had a lot of trouble learning to speak. (Ok, there is nothing documented about Einstein having unintelligible speech, but it's true that he took many years to start to speak). I explain: "This man's name is Einstein and he is very very famous...When he was little had a lot of trouble learning how to speak...And do you know why this man is so famous? Because he was one of the smartest people that have ever lived! See, this is what you have to remember, just because you have trouble talking, doesn't mean that you aren't smart. I know you've got lots of great things inside your

head and at the moment, it's tricky to say them. I want to help you get your messages out."

It's then that you can explicitly discuss and teach the ways in which the child can help get their message across when a speech attempt hasn't worked. These include saying things a different way, using pictures, gesture or sign language. These are explained below.

2. CAN YOU SAY IT ANOTHER WAY? This is a common strategy and it can often work. Some children will keep repeating the same unintelligible phrase over and over again. It is important to acknowledge that you don't understand those words and ask The adult should simply say "Can you say it another way?" or "Can you use some other words to help me understand?"

Practise this strategy in speech therapy:

The child may benefit from explicit teaching and practice in "saying something another way." This may be a game that you play together as part of speech practice. For this game, the focus is not on getting the words or sounds clear, but instead the focus is on the language and the concept of "saying something another way."

Show a picture. It may be Mum's car. First you would say "What's this?" and the child might try and say "Mum's car" . The adult says "Great.... I'll think how to say it another way... I know.... What Mum drives" (*and gesture driving*). Now the adult asks, "Can you think of any other ways? " The child might come up with "The blue Holden".

Try again, show a picture of the child's pet. The child might say "That's Buggy"... The adult asks "Can you think of another way to say it?" The child might say "My rabbit" ...and then "My bunny." Praise the child for the number of different ways they can think of.

3. CAN YOU SHOW ME? Another common strategy is this one. It only works however if the child is talking about something nearby that can be shown.

4. USING AN INTERPRETER Parents or siblings are frequently able to make sense of speech with far greater success than a less familiar listener. This is because a) they may be used to the way the child says certain words and b) because they are more likely to know the background or the context of a story being told. Having these "interpreters" nearby can be very useful, but when relying on others to "interpret", there are a few tips to follow. Be careful that the interpreter is not jumping in too soon, therefore not allowing the child to try and express themselves first. Interpreters should try and fill in confusing words, or maybe the background to the story, but not "take over" the whole interaction.

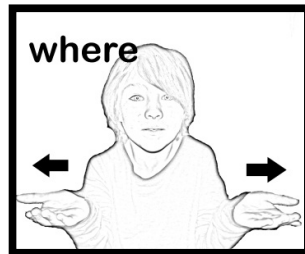
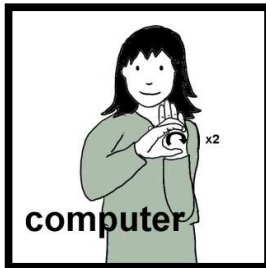
Having a chat with the parent or sibling separate to the child can be a good idea. Explain that you would like to try and understand "Johnny" but if you get stuck, you will look at them to help. The interpreter can then say something like: "Oh, Lucia doesn't know that we went camping on the weekend and she doesn't know your cousins. Do you mind if I just fill her in and then she can follow your story better?"

The other thing is, that interpreters sometimes get the message wrong. They should always check that they are on the right track when explaining what a child has said. "Is that right Johnny?"

5. SIGN LANGUAGE AND GESTURE I have worked with many children over the years who have very low intelligibility. Sign and gesture has been their saviour.

Gesture includes anything from pointing to holding up fingers for numbers, to shrugging the shoulders to indicate “I don’t know.” Adults should use lots of gesture to encourage the child to do so as well. It is sometimes a good idea to explain what the gesture means. For example, “When you don’t know the answer, you can try and say ‘I don’t know’ but you can do this with your shoulders too...Doing this (shrug) means ‘I don’t know’.”

Gesture is the very least that an adult should be promoting. Formal signs complete the picture. Naturally, people who are familiar to that child will also need to learn some sign language. For one, they will need to understand what the child is signing and secondly, using sign themselves normalizes the use of signing and helps the unintelligible child build up a signing vocabulary by copying.



FAR LEFT: From “Sign Language for Schools” .

LEFT: From “The Early Language Pack”.

These resources are available from Pelican Talk and are great for teaching/learning Auslan signs.

Teach signs for important and motivating things and also teach and use signs for actions, feeling and descriptions. Pelican Talk has several products that are great for learning to sign. They include pictures that can be printed off and sent home along with instructions how to sign.

Always encourage speech along with the signs and gesture.

Formal signs may not always be the choice for some children. They may make up their own signs. This is great, as long as people understand what they are signing. A “sign and gesture inventory” is useful to keep. This can include a list of signs the child uses frequently and how they do the sign. This is also good for children who are attempting Auslan signs but cannot carry out the fine motor movements accurately. For example, they might shake their index finger for “finished” instead of shaking their thumb. A free signing inventory can be downloaded from the FREE STUFF page on the [Pelican Talk website](#).

Sign language may not be an option for all children as some children may be unable to form even approximations of the handshapes. If this is the case, pictures or objects are a great option. (They can be used with kids who are signing as well. We call this “total communication” – we aim to promote ALL methods of communicating!)

6. PICTURES Using pictures is important for the unintelligible child. It means they can refer to something in response to a question, or the picture may help establish what the child is wanting to speak about (thus, helping the listener understand the context).

Pictures should be of highly relevant things in the child’s life, but just like the signing vocabulary, they should contain pictures of feelings, adjectives (broken, dirty, secret, etc...), places, people, as well as “things”.

To the right is an example, of a folder that was used at preschool. It contained a page of outdoor activities and related vocabulary, things to do with the beach, pictures of people in the child's life and so on. The child using this was very familiar with how the pictures were organized and could quickly find the needed word. This folder was handy for the child to take between home and preschool and also to grandma's house as it helped the child to report about things he had been doing.



Programs such as Boardmaker™ (Mayer Johnson) can be used to generate the picture books, but these days, digital photos and ClipArt™ are good options.

Like sign language, using a picture book to accompany speech can be modeled by a teacher or parent so the child feels it is a normal thing to do. The book can even be used as a means of having a conversation. *“Let’s get out the word book... (find and point to the picture of the beach)... I went to the beach on the weekend... (*point to picture of swim). I didn’t swim because it was too cold (*gesture cold)... What do you like to do when you go to the beach?”*

7. CHAT BOOK, STORY POUCH, PHOTO KEY-RING Communication is not just about expressing what you want or need. Talking about what has happened (“reporting”) is a very important part of kids’ speech...

“We went to Luna Park and went on four rides. My brother puked on the Rollercoaster”...“We went to Lakes on the weekend and saw a movie and then we got an icecream.”

There are some other picture-based ways to assist with reporting skills.

A “chat book” or “story pouch” is simply a book or plastic envelope in which you gather tokens from an outing. It is constantly updated (although the “chat book” can become like a scrapbook and gather pages of memories.)



A story pouch. Includes tokens and a note from an adult to “fill the listener in”.

They allow the child to show a listener “tokens” from their outing, thus forming the context for an interaction. A note from a knowing adult is always good to include. The listener quickly reads the note, so they know the background to the story. They then encourage the child to show each token as they “have a chat”. The child gains much more success in being

understood as the listener has already read the information written in the note and can therefore ask relevant questions and make appropriate comments.

Ideas for a chat book or Story Pouch include:

*a movie ticket, the logo from a KMART catalogue with the shoe section included - to show that the child went to the movies, then KMART bought some new runners

*a shell, an icecream wrapper – to show that the child went to the beach, collected shells and got an icecream

It is a good idea for parents to rehearse the interaction before the chat book or story pouch is sent to preschool/school/grandparents' house.

Photo keyrings are also very easy to use and now cheaply available. Five to ten important photos of people, places and actions can be loaded on to the keyring after an event and used to establish the context for reporting. Keep in mind that the photos are small and cannot easily be viewed outdoors.

8. REHEARSING Often it helps to practice certain phrases or sentences prior to an event such as Show 'n' Tell or someone's birthday.

One brilliant mother I worked with, would have her son (who had a severe verbal dyspraxia) practise what he was going to say for "morning sharing time". Together with the child, the mother would figure out what the child wanted to say and then the mum would write the sentences down, thinking of the easiest words and sentence structures to help the child say them. Next, they would practice saying the "script" together, first at home, and then on the way to school. The activity was kept fun and positive, and the mum would always make sure her son had a "prop" (something he could show) in case the words weren't clear.

Other things to rehearse may be the words that are used in a specific game or activity. Again, these should be carefully scripted by an adult so that the words involved are the easiest possible for the child. For example, instead of: "Would you like to come and play with the cars with me on the mat?" Practise "Do you wanna do cars with me (**and point to the mat*)?" A preschool teacher could first practise this with the child before that child approached another.

"What's the Time Mr. Wolf?" is another good one to practice. Have all the children in the game hold up their fingers when they are the wolf saying the time. "Dinner time!" is a relatively easy phrase for most children to practise.



Rehearse saying "Happy birthday" on the way to a birthday party.

9. COMMON WORDS AND PHRASES There will be common words that a child will want to use in their speech. Often these are names of people (brothers and sisters) and places (holiday destinations, for example). Names can be particularly difficult to say as there are some curly ones out there!

Words such as these, along with words that are used in everyday interactions should be practiced as part of a core vocabulary. A speech pathologist can help with this.

Phrases and sentences to practise might include: “My turn” “Your turn” “I’m finished” “Can I have a go?” “Thank you” “I’m hungry” “I need a drink” “I need a wee” “My name’s _____” “What’s your name?” “At kinder” “My house”. “My sister” “My brother”

Where words or phrases remain unintelligible, but consistent, an inventory of words may be useful in the interim. This would include a list of the child’s common words and phrases and the way they say them. People who interact frequently with the child (such as staff at preschool, school, clubs, afterschool care etc...) should read through and become familiar with this. This is a similar concept to the sign and gesture inventory that was mentioned in tip number 5. An inventory can’t include every word or phrase, but just common ones that assist will assist the communication exchange.

An example:

TARGET WORDS	WHAT HE SAYS
Letitia (his sister)	Sheesha
Big school	Bidoo

There are also strategies that the adult communicator needs to adopt, in order to make communication easier:

10. QUESTIONS Think about the type of questions you are asking the child. *Yes/no questions*, are good, but better still, are *choice questions*. In many instances, it better to avoid *open-ended* questions unless you are asking something that is within context.

For example, if you saw the child and you know it was their birthday the day before, but you have no idea what they did, you could ask:

*AN OPEN question: *What did you do for your birthday?*

Open questions may lead to the child answering with something you can’t follow.

*A YES/NO question: *Did you have a nice birthday?*

Yes/no questions can be good... but where to next? They can also lead to the child saying “Yes....” and then following on with something you don’t understand.

*A CHOICE question: *Did you stay at home for your birthday or did you go somewhere special?*

By asking a choice question, you can hope that the child will respond with one of the two options and therefore you will be able to follow. Be careful how you choose your choices.

For example, you wouldn’t ask, *Did you have chocolate cake or an icecream cake?* Because the child may have had neither and then may start describing their cake, leaving you lost.

A better question about the cake could be: *Did you have...let me guess... chocolate cake or another sort of cake?*

At this point, the child may then start to talk more freely and you may then like to try the LET ME GUESS strategy.... (see below).

Note: The “One-Two Question strategy” is useful for children who are extremely unintelligible to the point that the listener cannot decipher either response to a choice question. It is also useful for children who are non-verbal. The “One -Two Question strategy” (1-2Q) can be downloaded from the Pelican Talk website.

11. LET ME GUESS Kids like guessing games. Often you can continue a conversation with the LET ME GUESS strategy, but don't overuse this one. It is a good one for unfamiliar people to use when they are really struggling. The strategy puts the speaking role back on the adult and the child needs only say YES or NO.

Using the above example again, you might start with a choice question:

Did you stay at home or go somewhere special on your birthday?

Child: ay e oh

*You: Oh, you stayed at home! Now **let me guess** what you might have done... Hang on, let me see... I bet you ... had a cake?*

Child: Yep.

You: Let me try and guess more... I bet you got some presents? Let me guess how many...three?

Child: No, o - o be-he.

Oh dear – the listener might now be lost again! At this point, you could ask the child to show you the answer with their fingers. See tip number 5.

12. CHOOSING LOW VERBAL and NON VERBAL GAMES Last of all, we must remember that speech is difficult for the child. Attempting clear speech takes energy and concentration and there will be times when the child needs the pressure removed. It is very important that games and activities are promoted where the child can enjoy interaction without the pressure to speak.

Activities and games that do not rely on speech include:

Pop-up Pirate TM, Wiggly Worms TM, Beetle TM, Memory, Skittles, Building blocks/construction, Dancing to music, Hide 'n' Seek, Chasey, Riding bikes, Colouring, Painting, Drawing, Computer games.

**Please contact Pelican Talk with any questions or feedback about this tip sheet.
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