
Advice sheets for parents

Exercises for the lips, tongue, soft palate, breath control and voice production

The following briefly explains the function of each of the lips, tongue, soft palate, breath control and voice production in speech. For simplicity, the child is referred to as "he" in all the Advice sheets, but they are applicable to both girls and boys.

Lips

The lips are important for activities such as control of dribbling, swallowing and blowing as well as speech sound production. Your child needs to be able to open/close his lips and to move them forwards and into a spread (smile) position. During speech, some sounds such as /sh/, /w/, and /oo/ need the lips to move forwards and round. Other sounds such as /ee/ need the lips to be spread. It is important that your child can move his lips from one position to the other quickly. Lip exercises will help him gain the control of his lips and help him to move them rapidly.

Tongue

Tongue movement is important for chewing, licking and swallowing as well as playing a major part in speech sound production. During speech the tongue must move forwards/backwards, up/down rapidly - so that sounds are accurately produced. If your child has speech problems and finds it difficult to move his tongue accurately outside his mouth as well as inside, tongue exercises will help him learn to make accurate tongue movements.

Soft palate

It is difficult to see the soft palate and to see how well it is moving. However, this muscular continuation of the hard palate (roof of the mouth) performs a very important function. When it moves up against the back of the throat, it is responsible for shutting off the nasal passages and so prevents air from going down the nose. The soft palate closes off the nose in this way during blowing and sucking activities and also should do so for all speech sounds except /m/, /n/, and /ng/. If for any reason it is not moving very well, air will pass up the nasal passages and the speech produced will have a nasal tone. If your child has this nasal tone to his speech or finds it difficult to blow and suck, exercises for the soft palate may help.

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Breath control

This is the basis of all speech production. Speech is produced while breathing out (exhalation). Children with Verbal Dyspraxia often have difficulty, which may be: weak, shallow breathing, the inability to control breathing out for long enough to produce a phrase, or poor coordination of breathing and speech patterns. This may mean that the child can only produce one syllable per breath, or only a few syllables per breath. As a consequence, the child's speech may sound jerky and stilted, and words are produced slowly and with great effort.

Your child needs to build up easy breathing and control for speech production through working on 'Exercises for Adequate Breath Control'.

Early voice production

The Voice Box (Larynx) is responsible for the production of sound during speech. The sound is produced by the air (breath) passing through the vocal cords to produce vibration. Children with Verbal Dyspraxia may have difficulty in controlling and coordinating the air with the vocal cords, so production of voice may be intermittent and the child may be unable to predict when the sound will be produced.

Your child needs to build up the ability to produce voice for speech production, with full control and coordination of voice and speech sounds.

Improving voice quality

Voice production is affected by a range of different factors, which we use as part of our communication through speech.

Specific characteristics include:

- Basic quality, without weakness, huskiness etc.
- Ability to maintain the voice quality for the length of a phrase etc.
- Ability to control volume and use different volumes in different situations.
- Ability to control the pitch of the voice and use different pitches in different situations.
- Ability to use expression (intonation) to help convey the meaning of what you are saying, e.g. a questioning voice, an angry voice etc.

Your child needs to build up the ability to use voice with appropriate control of all these qualities, as part of his speech and language production for communication.

On the following pages there are examples of activities to encourage control of the lips, tongue, palate, breath control and voice production. Your Speech and Language Therapist will have demonstrated some of the activities to you and your child. Make sure you are clear about what you are trying to achieve. If your child has difficulty with an exercise, continue to work on the other areas and discuss the difficulty with your Speech and Language Therapist.

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Exercises for the lips

Suggested materials

Candles, bubbles, straws, whistles, blow pipes, cotton wool, tissue paper, ping pong balls, feathers, lip stick, lip shape pictures, pencil, foodstuffs *, mirror.

CAUTION: Activities that involve putting things in children's mouths (such as lolly sticks, toothbrushes, lollipops, blowing toys) should always be carried out with the child sitting securely in order to avoid the risk of injury.

Activities to encourage lip rounding

Aim: To improve lip rounding, lip protrusion and control the flow of air out of the mouth. This will also exercise the soft palate.

- Use a mirror and encourage him to copy an "oo" shape. At first, you may need to gently push the lips from a tight stretch position to the round position.
- Push lips forwards as for kissing. Practise kissing a teddy/dolly.
- Push lips forward and make round shapes in a saucer of icing sugar.
- Paint lips with lip-stick and make round prints on paper or a mirror.
- Carnival blowers/whistles - use "instruments" with rounded mouth-pieces to encourage lip rounding. These should be held with the lips and not the teeth.
- Hold a pencil between upper lips and nose - good for older children.
- Candles - use small cake candles, stuck in something steady e.g. plasticine. Light the candles and encourage your child to blow them out with a gentle blow and rounded lips.
- Blowing candles through a straw - if your child has difficulty in the above activity, try blowing out the candles through a straw. Make sure that the straw is held between the lips and not between the teeth. You can check this by looking at the end of the straw to see if it has been bitten. If your child finds it difficult to hold a thin plastic straw, then try varying widths of plastic tubing e.g. beer-making tubes. Try to blow out the candles one at a time rather than all at once, so that there is plenty of repetition of small puffs and therefore more exercise.
- Bubbles can be blown through the plastic wand or by using a straw through the wand. This produces many small bubbles. Also try blowing bubbles in a drink, using a straw.
- Try blow-football using straws and ping-pong balls. This is more fun if two people, sitting opposite each other blow down straws at the same time. Cotton wool and tissue paper can be used in the same way.

Activities to encourage putting lips together

- Lip Smacking. Put a sticky food on the top lip and encourage your child to take it off with the bottom lip. Also try this the other way round i.e. place food on bottom lip and take it off with the top lip. The tongue should not be used for this exercise - only the lips.
- Using lips to pick up food pieces. At first try to pick up quite large pieces with lips and gradually work down to smaller pieces. Remember only use the lips not the teeth.
- Lip Printing. Paint lips with lipstick and make lips together prints on paper or a mirror.