

# Practical Advice Sheet: Psychological Formulations and Formulation Driven Intervention

This advice sheet includes some psychological formulation ideas which may be relevant when seeking to understand why a child may be struggling to generalize the speech sounds they have mastered in speech therapy. These ideas are rooted in psychological theory and have developed through multidisciplinary discussion, case reviews and clinical experience. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list and all ideas should be considered within the framework of an individual assessment of a child and their context and within the reader's professional guidelines, expertise and competence. The ideas have been grouped into categories – individual child factors, interpersonal factors, cognitive factors and learning theory-related factors – for ease of reading. In practice, the ideas are rarely exclusive to one category. I have included a very brief summary of each formulation idea and below this in italics, where appropriate, is one suggested way that this could be used as part of a discussion with the child and family or included in a letter. I have also included the types of interventions to consider if your formulation suggests a particular factor is important. These suggestions should be read in conjunction with the preceding chapters which include the theoretical foundations and more detailed discussion.

## Individual child factors

### Identity

It may be that the way the child's speech sounds is an important part of the child's identity. They may be happy with the way they sound, or this may be what they are familiar with, what they know.

*It may be that their voice using their old speech sounds right to them. It could be that as they are used to their voice and speech sounding a certain way, when they use their new speech, it then sounds strange or wrong to them.*

If your formulation includes identity as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on developmental factors', 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' and 'interventions addressing the anxiety associated with using the new speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

### Noticeability

If a child generalizes their newly-acquired speech sounds into their everyday speech, this may sound noticeably different both to the child and potentially to others. It is possible that this noticeable change for the child may make them feel that their speech is more conspicuous than when they are using their 'old' speech including the speech errors.

*It may be that using their new speech makes them feel self-conscious or conspicuous. If people around them are used to their old speech, then a change is likely to be noticeable and may attract comments from others. It may be that they feel more comfortable using their old speech sounds which they and everyone else are used to rather than using the new sounds, even though these make their speech clearer. It may be that this is a factor for children who are slightly more reserved and who don't like being 'in the spotlight'.*

If your formulation includes noticeability as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' and 'interventions addressing the anxiety associated with using the new speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **There is more at stake if they try hard and are not understood**

Using their original speech sounds is likely to give a predictable response from others, in terms of being understood or not. If there is a chance the child will still not be understood using their new speech sounds, this might feel quite risky. It is possible they will experience one or a combination of the following: embarrassment (at having made an effort and their speech not being any clearer to understand), shame (as attention is drawn to any speech difficulties), anxiety and uncertainty (about what to do next to try to make themselves understood, i.e., try correct speech sounds again or revert to more familiar speech sounds), and a sense of failure (from having worked hard on the correct speech sounds yet not being able to make themselves understood).

*It may be that using the new speech sounds feels quite risky for them and there is more at stake. When they use their old speech sounds they are used to sometimes not being fully understood. However, children may be wary of making the effort to use new speech sounds if they may still not be understood.*

If your formulation includes there being more at stake if they try hard and are not understood, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' and 'interventions addressing the anxiety associated with using the new speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **Habit**

We all have habitual ways of speaking and these can be different in different contexts. For example, many people will identify with having a slightly different voice they use on the telephone or in work to the one they use with friends.

*It may be that they are stuck in a habit of using certain speech in certain situations. We can all use slightly different speech in different situations. For example, some people have a slightly different voice or speech when they are on the telephone, or different voice or speech when they are at home compared to at work.*

If your formulation includes habit as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' section in the accompanying chapter.

## **The child may not be able to notice the errors in their own speech**

It may be that the child is struggling to notice and to 'hear' the errors in their own speech.

*It may be that they cannot recognize that they are using incorrect sounds, even though they can spot it if other people make the same error.*

If your formulation includes the child maybe not being able to notice the errors in their own speech, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on developmental factors' and 'Interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **The child may be starting to get a sense of personal autonomy**

It may be that the child or young person is at an age where they are starting to get more of a feeling of independence and an awareness that they have control over some things.

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If your formulation includes the child starting to get a sense of personal autonomy as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on developmental factors' section in the accompanying chapter.

## **Interpersonal factors**

### **Unpredictability of response from others**

Another factor which may be relevant is the unpredictability of the response from others. As discussed under 'Noticeability', a child or young person may be accustomed to other people's responses to their speech including the speech errors. Even though people may not understand certain sounds or words, the child will be used to this and will likely have a repertoire of responses, albeit not necessarily 'helpful' responses. It might therefore be that when a child uses their new speech sounds, the response, or anticipated response, from others is no longer predictable, thereby raising anxiety.

*It may be that they are quite comfortable with using their old speech sounds. Probably they get a fairly predictable response from other people in terms of whether or not they are understood. It could be that using their new speech sounds means that the response they get from other people will be unpredictable. The effect of this could be that using the new speech sounds is more stressful for him/her.*

If your formulation includes the unpredictability of responses from others as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' and 'interventions addressing the anxiety associated with using the new speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

### **Their old speech patterns may result in reduced expectations from school, family, and peers**

It may be that having unclear speech has served a purpose, or a function, for the child or young person. Sometimes we find that the people around a child, such as teachers, family and peers, can have lower expectations of the child if their speech is unclear.

*It may be that having unclear speech has served a purpose for them. Sometimes we find that the people around a child, such as teachers, family and peers, can have lower expectations if their speech is unclear. When a child is unconfident or finds social or school situations difficult for any reason, maintaining their old speech may feel helpful in that they feel under less pressure.*

If your formulation includes reduced expectations from school, family and peers as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' and 'interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

### **The old speech patterns may produce a protective response from peers and siblings**

Another way in which continuing to use their old speech errors may be functional for the child or young person is in relation to the response from peers and siblings. It may be that using their old speech provokes a protective response from peers and siblings.

*It may be that using their old speech provokes a protective response from peers. For example, friends might 'translate' or answer for them and may defend them if other people are making any unkind comments. Using the new speech sounds might then risk losing this protective response.*

If your formulation includes a protective response from peers and siblings as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' section in the accompanying chapter.

## **Their speech may be something that makes them interesting/special in their context**

In some instances, it may be that the child has found that their old speech is of benefit to them. Linked to ideas around identity, it may be that having different sounding speech or certain speech sounds is something that makes the child feel interesting or special in some way, either in their own view of themselves or in their perception of others' view of them.

*It may be that they find that their old speech is a benefit to them. For example, sometimes having different sounding speech can be seen as something that makes a child interesting or special.*

If your formulation includes their speech being something that makes them interesting or special in their context as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on peer relationships' and 'interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **Cognitive factors**

### **Using the new speech sounds requires concentration and effort**

For a child to use the new speech sounds will require concentration and effort. The process of monitoring their speech and articulating the correct speech sounds, as well as remembering to do this, could require sustained effort on the child's part, at least in the early stages of generalization. Children will vary in their temperament and cognitive development and will have varying capacity to do this across different times of day and contexts.

*It may be that using the new speech sounds requires concentration and effort. In effect, it may be easier for them to slip back to using their old speech sounds.*

If your formulation includes the requirement of concentration and effort as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on developmental factors' and 'interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

### **It may be difficult to speak with intent**

It may be that the child or young person is at an age or developmental stage where it is quite difficult for them to remember to deliberately use their new speech sounds. In effect, until the speech sounds are generalized, we are asking children to be able to consciously stop and think before speaking. This is quite a complex cognitive process.

*It may be that they are at an age where it is quite difficult for them to remember to deliberately use their new speech sounds. Children at this age are not always very good at stopping and planning before acting.*

If your formulation includes difficulty with speaking with intent as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on developmental factors' section in the accompanying chapter.

## **Learning theory-related factors**

### **Not being understood may not cause problems**

For some children, using their old speech sounds may not cause the child any difficulties. It may be that they are still usually understood or that they are not bothered by not being understood.

*It may be that using their old speech sounds does not cause them any problems. It may be that they are still usually understood or that they are not bothered by not being understood and therefore there is little motivation for them to change.*

If your formulation includes not being understood is not causing problems for the child as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions focusing on developmental factors' and 'interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **The child may never have had feedback that their speech is hard to understand**

It may be that the child or young person has never had feedback from other people that their speech is hard to understand, or that they are making speech errors.

*It may be that they have never had feedback from other people that their speech is hard to understand or that they are making speech errors. Often the people around a child will work hard to make sure the child feels accepted and not criticized. In many and most ways this is great and really helpful for the child. However, it can mean that the child has not come to realize that their speech is difficult to understand or that they sound different to others.*

If your formulation includes the child not having had feedback that their speech is hard to understand as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **The incorrect speech sounds may have been rewarded as cute speech**

One of the risks when children make speech errors or have unclear speech is that this can be interpreted by people around the child as sounding quite 'cute' or 'sweet'. A possible consequence of this is that this 'cute speech' is unintentionally rewarded by those around the child through lots of smiles and attention.

*It may be that when they were younger, their unclear speech sounded quite 'cute' or 'sweet'. It can be that this 'cute speech' gets rewarded, unintentionally, by those around the child through lots of smiles and attention. Where this happens the old speech can become a fairly fixed habit.*

If your formulation includes the child not having had feedback that their speech is hard to understand as an important factor, consider interventions as detailed in the 'interventions attending to factors that may be reinforcing not using the correct speech sounds' sections in the accompanying chapter.

## **Benefits from continued speech and language therapy sessions**

When thinking about possible ways to understand why progress in speech and language therapy may have become stuck, it may be helpful to consider the potential benefits to the child or young person and to the family of the impact this has on speech and language therapy sessions.

If your formulation includes the benefits from continued speech and language therapy sessions as an important factor, consider interventions that add things in for the child or parents that will replace the function or need being met by the therapy sessions.