

Resource Sheet: Practical Task for Parents/Carers or Teaching Staff

Read the sentence below:

On a warm summer's evening around six o'clock, just as the sun is starting to set, Mr Smith can sometimes be seen sitting outside his house, watching the passers-by taking an evening stroll.

Question: How many 's' or 'z' sounds are in the sentence?

(You may find it easier to underline them before counting them.)

Answer

There are 22 in total (16 's' sounds and 6 'z' sounds) – remember we are referring to sounds rather than letters.

On a warm summer's evening around six o'clock, just as the sun is starting to set, Mr (Mister) Smith can sometimes be seen sitting outside his house, watching the passers-by taking an evening stroll.

- Some words may have an 's' when written but the sound we say is actually a 'z', e.g., 'is' or 'as' and the end of the word 'sometimes'.
- People will often spot the sounds on obvious words such as 'sun' but may miss the sounds in smaller words like 'is' or 'as'.
- It may be easy to remember the sound at the beginning of a word but perhaps not when it falls at the end or in the middle of a word, e.g., 'house', 'outside'.
- Written down, the word 'six' ends in 'x' but it actually makes an 's' sound (pronounced 'siks'), and there is no obvious 's' in the written word 'Mr' though it is needed for the spoken word.

Working out the number of sounds in the above task is complicated. When children are taught new sounds and are beginning to use them, they have to work out where the sounds are needed but to do this while speaking without the help of written words and without having much time to think!

1. Re-read the sentence above out loud but every time there is either an 's' or 'z' sound, replace it with the sound 'g'.
How did you find this task? It is likely to have been tricky and perhaps effortful. This is exactly what children are having to do – replace the sounds that they are used to using with a 'new' sound.
2. Now try having a conversation for a few minutes and every time you want to say the sound 's' or 'z', try saying a 'g' sound instead.

This is where it becomes even more difficult. You are having to think on your feet, and this pattern of speech is not what you are used to, it doesn't sound right to you. This is, however, what we are asking the child to do – they may usually make a 'g' sound but we want them to use an 's' sound instead. This is going to be hard for them – it's not surprising that lots of mistakes are made as they are trying to do this, or sometimes it's just not worth the effort and they don't want to change their sounds at all.

3. Imagine needing to replace your usual sound with a new sound and keeping this up for a long time – for the whole day even. This would be exhausting, but it's often what children with speech difficulties are being expected to do.

What about if you suddenly had to change your pattern of speech in front of friends? They may be used to how you sound and are wondering why you are suddenly talking in a different way. You are likely to feel self-conscious or embarrassed. You may also be reluctant to use your speech in other situations, e.g., asking for an item in a shop – you may be worried that you will not be understood, or what if you try and fail? These are the feelings that your child may be experiencing as they are learning new patterns of speech.

The above tasks give an indication of some of the difficulties and feelings that children may be experiencing, and will hopefully help to show why using new sounds can be very tiring and daunting. This is the reason why encouraging children to use their sounds should be done in small steps, e.g., at first in specific situations or for limited amounts of time and gradually building up the demands placed on them. Using sounds consistently takes time and patience and children will need lots of support.