



## What is the Difference between Speech and Language? Aren't they the same? Is there a difference?

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No. They aren't the same thing, and yes, there is a *huge* difference between the two. The process of speech occurs naturally when appropriate stimulation occurs and progresses without conscious thought. From infancy, we begin developing the milestones of speech that help us begin communicating with sounds, and then, our speech skills help us develop language.

**Speech** – "Speech refers to the sounds that come out of our mouth and take shape in the form of words," (Hamaguchi, 1995) The speech process is extremely complicated when you study the scope and sequence of its development.

A number of events must occur for us to speak. The brain **MUST**:

- Want to communicate an idea to someone else.
- Send the idea to the mouth.
- Tell the mouth which words to say and which sounds make up those words.
- Incorporate patterns and accented syllables (to avoid sounding like a robot).
- Send the signals to the muscles that control the tongue, lips, and jaw; however, the muscles, must have the strength and coordination to carry out the brain's commands.



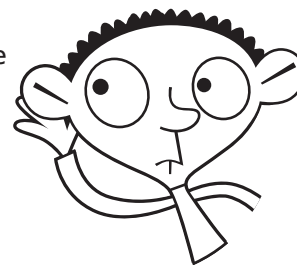
The muscles in the lungs must be strong enough to control sufficient amounts of air while forcing the vocal cords to vibrate. The air must be going out, not in, for *functional speech* to occur. The vocal cords must be in good condition in order for one's speech to sound clear and loud enough to hear. Our sense of hearing monitors and reviews what we say and hears new words to imitate and use in other situations. If we cannot hear clearly, we tend to reproduce sounds that are equally "mumbly." Also, someone must be willing to communicate with us by listening and reacting to what we say, or there is no point in speaking. The process of developing speech occurs naturally. However, if there is a glitch or disruption in the process, it will affect one's language.

**Language** – Language is what we speak, write, read, and understand. Language is also communicating through gestures (body language or sign language). There are two distinct areas of language: *receptive* (what we hear and understand from others' speech or gestures) and *expressive* (the words we use to create messages others will understand).

In order for children to begin using and understanding *spoken* language, they must:

- Hear well enough to distinguish one word from another.
- Have someone model what words mean and how to put sentences together.
- Hear intonation patterns, accents, and sentence patterns.
- Have the *intellectual* capability to process what words and sentences mean, store the information, and recall words and sentences heard previously when communicating an idea to someone else.
- Have the *physical* capability to speak in order for others to hear and understand the words they are saying.
- Have a social need and interest in using words to communicate with others.
- Have another person to positively reinforce their attempts at communication.

Children with receptive language problems may find listening and attending to conversation, stories, oral directions, classroom activities, etc. confusing and difficult at times. If a child's receptive language doesn't fully develop, the language learning process slows down before it ever begins. Parents tend to be concerned when their child isn't talking the way they expect or in the way their same-age peers can talk. If this is happening, a speech-language pathologist will find out if the child is hearing clearly and understanding language (receptive language). If not, the child's expressive language (meaningful speech) is not going to develop. This is why speech therapy focuses on strengthening a child's receptive language, even if the concern is that the child isn't talking properly.



Bottom line – speech is the physical process of forming words; language is what speech creates – the output, or product.

If your child is having difficulty developing speech and/or language skills, it is possible that he/she may also have weak listening skills – usually attributed to an inability to hear well. Strong listening skills are necessary in order to receive and develop sounds for speech and, subsequently, develop language for communication. Consult a speech-language pathologist (SLP) to evaluate your child's development of speech and language if you feel that his/her skills are lacking or not developing at a normal\* rate. The earlier an SLP can identify and begin treating a child's speech and/or language problems, the less likely the problems will persist or get worse. Early speech and language intervention can help children be more successful with reading, writing, schoolwork, and interpersonal relationships.

\* **Educators and therapists use the term "normal" as a generic statistical term to mean typical or average.**

#### Resources

American Speech-Language Hearing Association. 2013. *How does your child hear and talk?* Retrieved online October, 2013, from <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/chart.htm>

Hamaguchi, Patricia A. (2001) *Childhood Speech Language & Listening Problems- Second Edition. What every parent should know.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Pages 7 – 11.

U.S. Library of Medicine – National Institutes of Health. (March, 2013). Medline Plus. *Language Disorder – Children.* Retrieved online from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001545.htm>

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*Early Developmental Milestones*  
[Item #BK-311](#)

*Early Language Development & Activities*  
[Item #BK-315](#)

*Language Strategies for Little Ones*  
[Item #TPX-10002](#)

*HearBuilder Following Directions*  
[Item #HBPE-133](#)

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