

Evaluating your child's communication skills

By Jennifer Higgins

As back-to-school time approaches, many parents may be wondering how their child will do this upcoming school year.



Often, that worry may center around a child's communication skills. If this is a concern of yours, then this article will explain what communication skills are and how to get help for your child.

Communication skills break down into two areas: speech and language. A Speech Language Pathologist works to help children and their families in these two main areas.

Speech refers to how language sounds. Delays in speech include articulation or phonological disorders (difficulty saying sounds), fluency (stuttering) or voice disorders (such as vocal nodules).

Language development can be broken down into three key areas: expressive, receptive and pragmatic language. In a conversation, for example, expressive language is what is being said, receptive language is understanding what is being said, and pragmatic language is the pre-

sentation of what is being said.

Expressive language therapy in young children may involve increasing a child's vocabulary, helping him to increase the number of words he uses in a sentence, adding variety to his sentences, or learning proper use of pronouns and verb forms. As children get older, they may need help formulating the answer to a question, or retelling stories and events.

Receptive language therapy often includes helping children learn strategies for following directions and knowing how to answer a question (such as knowing the difference between a "How" question and a "When" question). Some children may need help understanding a story or conversation or remembering information.

When working with children on developing pragmatic language skills, activities may involve teaching strategies and awareness of eye contact, turn-taking, staying on topic during a conversation, greetings, reading body language, and other areas of social language.

A delay in speech or language development can cause a disruption in your child's life. If you feel your child may have a delay, here are some steps you can take to address them.

Typically, the first step is to have your child's hearing checked by an

Audiologist. This is done to rule out hearing as a factor in the delay. Parents often say, "My child can hear." However, the Audiologist will be able to look at your child's hearing more specifically. If there is a hearing loss associated with a speech and language delay then a different plan would be put in place.

If your child is under the age of three, she may qualify for Early Intervention (EI). In Massachusetts, Early Intervention is run by the Department of Public Health. Services are provided in the child's natural environment (usually in the home or at daycare). Anyone can call and refer a child to the program. To find more information about EI and the programs that service your town, go to www.massfamilyties.org and click on "Early Intervention." After you refer your child, EI will set up an evaluation in your home. If your child qualifies, a fee is paid based on your income and a plan is developed to help your child in the necessary areas.

If your child is school age, you should first speak with his classroom teacher. She will be able to guide you through the steps to make a referral in your school district. Typically, once a referral is made, an evaluation will be conducted. Following the evaluation, a meeting will be

scheduled involving the classroom teacher, the special education staff, as well as those who evaluated your child. This meeting will review the results of the testing and determine the next steps. If your child qualifies for speech and/or language therapy an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) will be developed. The IEP will determine the frequency and goals of the therapy sessions.

What can you do if you are still concerned about your child's speech and language but she does not qualify for services in EI or in the school system? The American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA) and the Massachusetts Speech Language Hearing Association (MSHA) have websites with referral directories. These directories can provide you with local certified and licensed clinicians who are qualified to evaluate and treat speech and language delays. Before contacting a therapist, you should check with your insurance company to determine your speech and language therapy coverage. If your insurance won't cover the cost of therapy sessions, you may be able to use the money in your flexible spending plan to pay for therapy.

Your child's communication skills are very important. Speech and language impacts all areas of learn-

ing. Being advocates for our children and providing them with the help they need, as early as possible, is a big step towards making them successful in school and in life.

For more information, check out these websites:

Massachusetts Department of Education
www.doe.mass.edu/sped

Massachusetts Family Ties
www.massfamilyties.org

American Speech Language Hearing Association
www.asha.org

Massachusetts Speech Language Hearing Association
www.mshahearsay.org

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