

Tip Sheet

Explaining the Link Between Speech and Literacy Skills



'Speech' refers to the way that we form and produce sounds in words in order to convey thoughts and feelings. This ability affects how easily a person can be understood by others. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty saying some sounds early on in development (e.g., a child may say "tar" for "car" or "fumb" for "thumb"). These errors typically resolve on their own as children mature. However, some children will continue to incorrectly articulate speech sounds or have persistent error patterns in spoken words, which require targeted intervention to remediate. They may experience difficulties with speech motor planning, the articulation of sounds within words, and the perception or phonological representations of speech sounds, including the 'rules' that govern the sounds within spoken language.

Speech-sound difficulties, especially if untreated, can go on to hinder a child's literacy skill development. "Tuning in" to individual speech sounds (or phonemes) of spoken English is critical for children to develop effective reading and spelling skills. Establishing accurate letter-sound (grapheme – phoneme) relationships as well as the ability to manipulate phonemes is essential for literacy acquisition. These skills rely on a student's underlying phonological system, and so for children with speech-sound difficulties who are likely to have deficits in phonology, literacy development can prove problematic. Outlined below are the typical steps for reading and spelling, alongside the possible error patterns that can occur for children with speech-sound difficulties.

Typical steps for reading	Possible reading error for child who says the /r/ sound as /w/
Child looks at the word on the page in order to read it <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">red</div>	Child looks at the word on the page in order to read it <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">red</div>
Child correctly identifies the phonemes associated with each grapheme <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">/r...e...d/</div>	Child identifies the phonemes associated with each grapheme but makes a speech-sound error <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">/w...e...d/</div>
Child blends the phonemes together, reading the word correctly <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">red</div>	Child blends the phonemes together, reading the word incorrectly <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">wed</div>

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Explaining the Link Between Speech and Literacy Skills (continued)

Typical steps for spelling	Possible spelling error for child who says the /r/ sound as /w/
Child intends to write the word <div style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">red</div>	Child intends to write the word <div style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;">red</div>
Child correctly segments the phonemes within the word <div style="text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">/r...e...d/</div>	Child segments the phonemes within the word but makes a speech-sound error <div style="text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">/w...e...d/</div>
Child maps the corresponding graphemes, spelling the word correctly <div style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.5em;">red </div>	Child maps the corresponding graphemes, spelling the word incorrectly <div style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.5em;">wed </div>

*Phoneme = individual speech sound;
 Grapheme = representation of speech sound by one or more letters

What can be done to help?

Children who present with persistent speech sound production difficulties require targeted speech pathology intervention to help them learn to say the sounds of spoken English correctly, understand and use the sound-based rules of spoken language, and to effectively “tune in” to the sounds in words. This lays the necessary foundation for children to engage in high-quality structured phonics learning at school to develop efficient reading and spelling skills.