

# Speech and Development

➤ ONE of the best indications of a child's overall development may be his speech.

Psychological tests can be misleading and motor skills such as sitting and walking are ambiguous. That leaves oral language as "perhaps the clearest mirror" of a child's total functioning. Dr. Richard W. Olmsted of the University of Oregon Medical School in Portland told the American Academy of Pediatricians meeting in Chicago.

However, he said, pediatricians as a whole have had little exposure in the area of language development and disorders.

To help correct that situation, Dr. Olmsted and three of his colleagues from the University of Oregon pointed out the landmarks in normal language development and suggested simple tests for pediatricians to use in isolating the probable cause of delayed speech.

Nothing could be more erroneous than the common assumption that a child does not have to be examined for speech until his second year when he starts to talk, stated Dr. Harold Lillywhite.

During his first year, the child plays with sounds and learns to approximate easy consonants—"m", "p", "b" and so forth. Language potential can be predicted quite easily in this early period and corrective steps should be taken then, Dr. Lillywhite said.

Dr. Robert W. Blakeley suggested gross screening tests for five areas of possible trouble.

The last place to look for a speech deficiency is in the mouth, he said.

Mental retardation and/or central nervous system dysfunction is still the major cause of delayed language.

Hearing can be tested with soft sounds while the child is distracted with a toy. Oral structural defects are not common and are obvious in large tonsils, a high palate or a tongue tie, Dr. Blakeley said.

Similarly easy to recognize are neuromuscular defects which show up in sucking, chewing and swallowing, as well as in a monotone voice and slurred articulation.

The evidence must be quite strong before doctors accept emotional-social reasons as the cause of delayed speech, Dr. Blakeley said. He suggested that pediatricians ask questions such as: Do siblings have a similar disorder? Has the child been regularly beaten or severely criticized for being noisy? Is the child markedly withdrawn or aggressive?

Information on the last and most important category must come from parents. But parents, when they fear mental slowness, are "prejudiced, suggestible, forgetful and cagey," so the doctor is more likely to get honest answers if he begins his questioning on a "safe" level, just below where he thinks the child is already functioning, Dr. Blakeley said.

Most children alternate peaks of vocalization with periods of relative quiet. The slow child will have more dramatic changes and longer periods of quiet. A retarded child of 15 months, for instance, may not have started babbling.

If the child is slow in language development, Dr. Blakeley said, an excellent place for him is nursery school for the stimulation it provides.

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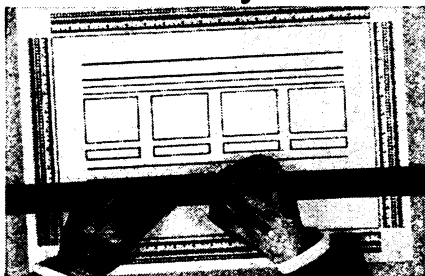
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