

BY JENNIFER EILEEN PETERS

THREE-year-old Faiz is a loner. He tends to play by himself and helps himself to the things he wants. He makes some sounds but does not use words. On the whole, Faiz depends on his parents to "know" what he wants and when he wants it. He throws tantrums often. He is often considered "naughty" or even a "difficult child".

Adrian is five years old and is a "disaster" in school. He can never sit still or pay attention in class. He, too, is often labelled as "naughty" and is very disorganized with what he says and is supposed to do. He is able to speak but is often not understood as his words and sentences are usually mixed up.

Mr Lim was an architect at the peak of his career. After suffering a stroke, he lost his ability to speak and to communicate. The frustration of not being able to communicate causes him to be depressed and he feels isolated from those around him.

What do these three persons have in common?

The answer to this question is "the inability to vocalise and communicate with others".

When you greeted someone with "Selamat Pagi" this morning and the person answered you, the exchange of greetings probably didn't strike you as being particularly complicated. In fact, you used your highly developed powers of speech, language and listening - all part of your ability to communicate. Now, in the event of you having laryngitis and losing your voice, and being unable to verbalise your communicative wants to others, you would begin to feel frustrated, irritated and isolated. This is due to the fact that your language and communication abilities have been limited.

Abilities such as listening, learning and vocally expressing our thoughts and opinions are gifts we tend not to think twice about on a day-to-day basis.

Children begin their journey towards successful communication as soon as they are born and a great deal of preparation must take place before that first word is uttered. However, being individuals, everyone has their own rate of progress. Some children appear to leap from speaking in single words, to speaking in sentences almost overnight, while others are slower, following a steadier course, with small steps.

In both groups, most children are usually able to learn to communicate equally well - in their own time, at their own pace, without any special attention given to them. It is the children who do not belong to either of these two groups, who need a little extra attention to help them along their way.

So what, then, is "normal"? How can two children, who exhibit different language abilities, both be considered "normal"?

Kai Yee may develop language for a two to three age group well before his second birthday, whereas Ruben may be just beginning to display those same behaviours as he approaches his third birthday. Both children fall into the normal range of development. Just because two children of the same age have markedly different communication patterns does not mean that one of them has a problem.

What is normal?

Did you know that a one-year-old is able to understand a variety of words and one-step commands fairly easily? By the age of two, a child should have a vocabulary of at least 50 words and some two-year-old children are even beginning to combine words into two to three word utterances. By age three, a stranger should be able to understand approximately 90% of what your child says.

There are numerous warning signs that you can look out for to check if your child is "on the right track", and if any of these

Speech language therapy

For people with difficulties communicating their thoughts and needs, life can be filled with untold obstacles. But such people need not suffer in silence, for help is available.



If you cannot verbalise your communicative wants to others, you would begin to feel frustrated, irritated and isolated.

signs are noted, you should be concerned. Amongst these warning signs is when, or if, your child does not initiate conversation or communicative acts, spontaneously. Or if he does not respond to his name or to questions put to him. He may be showing signs of frustration when he is not understood by the people around him or he is not understood by his own playmates and peers. If you note any of these, or more, warning signs it is advised that you should consult your doctor or a speech-language pathologist directly.

If you have any doubts or questions at all regarding your child's speech, language and listening development, it is always best to err on the side of caution and pursue a professional opinion. Good communication skills are an essential part to a child's future academic as well as social success. In fact, strong speech and language skills provide the basis for subjects such as reading, spelling and language learning. For this reason, it is very important that speech and language delays are identified and targeted at an early age.

Professional guidance

This brings me to the next questions. Where do you start? Whom do you see? And how do you know the person you go for help to, is qualified?

There are many different professionals available to help children who may be experiencing developmental delays. However, if your primary concerns are your child's speech, spoken language, understanding skills, processing of spoken language, or lack of communication in general, it makes sense to start with a speech-language pathologist (SLP). The terms speech-language pathologist, speech clinician, speech pathologist, and speech therapist, are often used interchangeably.

However, the Malaysian Association of Speech-Language & Hearing (MASH), as well as most associations and governing bodies around the world, use the term speech-language pathologist to better reflect the profession's orientation towards the diagnosis and treatment of language disorders.

The goal of the SLP is to help the child develop the speech and language skills necessary for good daily communication, to eliminate frustrating behaviours and reduce the impact of early speech delays on future reading and school success.

In short, SLPs help individuals achieve communication - one of our basic human needs. Therefore, speech and language therapy is provided to children and adults who are experiencing difficulties with their communication skills, and this, in turn, affects their ability to effectively, and clearly communicate with their families and the people around them.

In Malaysia, a list of qualified SLPs can be obtained from MASH. As the professional body within the country, MASH ensures that all its members have the appropriate level of qualifications, inclusive of an adequate number of clinical hours required in order to practise. Therefore, it is recommended that the public always ensure that the SLP they are consulting is a registered member of MASH. Members of MASH work in different settings, from government and private hospitals, to special schools and private practice.

Amongst the many problems that an SLP commonly encounters is to help those who have difficulties or delays in the following areas:

- Speech articulation (mispronouncing the sounds of words)
- Language grammar (difficulty in speaking in correct or complete sentences)
- Difficulties choosing the appropriate words to express ideas.
- Stammering/stuttering
- Voice disorders (loss of voice [dysphonia], change in quality of voice, etc.)
- Receptive language (Difficulty understanding and remembering what is said)
- Difficulties in listening, attending to and/or understanding speech.
- Emergent literacy (delays in understanding the sounds and combinations of sounds and book sharing skills that lead to reading and school success).
- Social language (Knowing how to use

speech in social situations and how to use speech to solve problems instead of resorting to inappropriate behaviours).

- Assistive technology (using computers and other technological devices to aid early communication development.)
- Difficulties in swallowing and feeding.

The process of evaluation

So, once you have decided to go to an SLP, what exactly is the SLP looking for? Initially, the SLP needs to answer the following questions:

- Is there a communication problem?
- What kind of problem is it?
- To what degree, or how severe, is the problem?
- Should other professionals be asked to do evaluations as well?
- How does the problem affect the person on a day-to-day basis?
- What kind of intervention will best help the person?
- What can family and caregivers do to help the person?

A skilled SLP usually begins a consultation by completing a comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation includes information provided by caregivers and professional observations are noted as the child engages in developmentally appropriate activities. Parents are usually encouraged to be present at the evaluation.

Next, the SLP reviews the results of the evaluation with the parent to assure that the results are good examples of the child's skills, and finally, the SLP writes a complete report.

The report should contain the results of the evaluation and suggestions for how to help your child acquire good speech and communication skills.

In the event that therapy is required, most children are seen on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Therapy would most often involve direct work with your child and at times it will involve working with you on strategies to support your child's communication development. Early diagnosis and intervention can mean the difference between having the ability to verbally communicate and the frustrating inability to communicate verbally.

The first "National Better Hearing and Speech Campaign" begins in the month of May in Malaysia. The campaign, with the support and participation of related government ministries, services and organisations, is meant to disperse information, to inform and to raise general awareness to speech and language problems and services available.

To this end, MASH has been working tirelessly, organising talks, articles and events to promote the public awareness and responsiveness to speech, language and hearing related issues.

Note: Jennifer Eileen Peters is a speech-language pathologist and member of MASH. For further information, please contact The Secretary Malaysian Association of Speech-Language and Hearing (MASH) at P.O. Box 610, Pejabat Pos Jalan Sultan, 45770 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia, or Email: mash1995@yahoo.com. Website: www.mash.org.my