

The Natural Speech Hierarchy

When children learn speech sounds, they follow a certain set of steps, from easiest to most difficult. This is called a speech hierarchy. When you are helping your child learn speech sounds, it is important to be aware of and follow these steps. Do not move to a higher step unless your child has mastered the skills at the step below. What follows is the hierarchy of steps, together with some suggested activities you can try at each step:

1. **The sound in isolation:** For very short but frequent times during the day, have your child try the sound all by itself. See if they can say it 5 times over. You can make this fun by turning the target sound into a funny sound. For example, if you are working on the /s/ sound, you can pretend that's the sound the faucet makes every time it goes on.
2. **The sound in syllables:** For very short but frequent times during the day, have your child try the sound in a syllable. For example, if you are working on /t/ sound, you can do a quick drill pairing the /t/ with vowels (tah, tee, too, toe, tie).
3. **The sound in words** (usually at the start of the word): Find pictures or objects that start with the target sound. Have your child name them while you play a game.
4. **The sound in simple phrases:** Again you can use the pictures or objects referred to above and play games where your child uses the word in a short, repeated phrase. For example, you can hide the pictures/objects and find them using a flashlight. When a picture is found your child can say "I found a _____" or "I got a _____".
5. **The sound in sentences:** Have your child use the target words in a variety of sentences. For example, you can go through a catalogue of toys and talk about the ones containing the target sound.
6. **The sound in conversation:** Have your child play with objects that contain the target sound and have them talk about what they are doing as they go.