

What to Expect During Your Child's First Speech Therapy Session

By Tamer Abouras

Whether by a referral from a pediatrician, the suggestion of a teacher, or your own suspicions, you have sought out the advice of a speech-language pathologist (SLP) regarding your child's speech difficulty or missed developmental milestones. When it comes to solving communication problems, any SLP will tell you the sooner the better, and having your child evaluated now will be a big help moving forward. But the initial evaluation process can be a daunting experience for you and your child. Sara Bergsma, MS, SLP-CCC, and Rebecca Haas, MS, SLP-CCC, share what you should prepare for upon your first visit and session with a speech therapist.

PAPERWORK & PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

While this is not a trip to your pediatrician, there's still no escaping filling out a few forms. According to Bergsma and Haas, one of the first steps is figuring out which developmental milestones have possibly been missed.

As an early interventionist (typically working with children 0-3), Haas tends to check for any communication at all with a child. She looks for gestures such as pointing, any kind of attempted vocalization or grunting, and how many words the child appears to recognize and understand, whether or not they can say them properly. Bergsma, who works with children just beyond the maximum age of early intervention (typically age 3), gives a handout to all first-time patients with specific developmental milestones by age. If you fill out a similar form, your therapist will most likely focus in on those milestones you have checked off as having been potentially missed.

When it comes to medical history questions that might be asked, your therapist will want to know if your child already has a diagnosis



on record. Additionally, an early interventionist might ask if your child was born on time or premature, which might change your child's projected milestones. Questions about your child's history with ear and sinus infections, as well as respiratory infections, are also common.

GETTING COMFORTABLE

Your SLP's ultimate goal in addressing communicative issues is to create a comfortable situation for your child, where he can freely express himself. This may or may not mean having you in the session room; while you will never be stopped from being there, your SLP might suggest you step out if your presence appears to be affecting your child's willingness to participate in the session. Conversely, if your presence and involvement helps, you might become more involved in the therapy.

Don't be surprised if your therapist begins the session by playing with balls, blocks, toys, or bubbles; building trust with your child is essential, and play is the best way to do that. Many early intervention sessions take place

in the home, so ask your therapist about their home care policies.

MOVING FORWARD

After the first session, your therapist may present you with forms asking you to write down your concerns, as well as your goals for treatment, and may provide some of their own on a written form as well. Your therapist will submit a full report promptly after the evaluation, with recommendations for care moving forward. Treatment can range in terms of length, both for the individual sessions and also overall time before reevaluation. Sessions can be anywhere from 30-60 minutes and span anywhere from 10 weeks to six months or longer, depending on age and particular conditions.

Sara Bergsma is an SLP at Chatterbox Speech and Language Center, Boise, Idaho, and **Rebecca Haas**, MS, SLP-CCC, is an SLP at Talking with Toddlers, Jackson, Miss.

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