

Cleft Care: Speech, language and hearing milestones

Children with a cleft palate can learn to communicate well, but they may need some extra support as they grow and develop. A cleft palate can affect:

- hearing
- speech development
- language development
- feeding.

Even after palate repair surgery, children may continue to need monitoring and support from their cleft team.

Hearing and middle ear health

Children with a cleft palate are more likely to have fluid in the middle ear (sometimes called glue ear or otitis media). This can cause mild hearing loss that may come and go.

Even mild hearing changes can make it harder for children to:

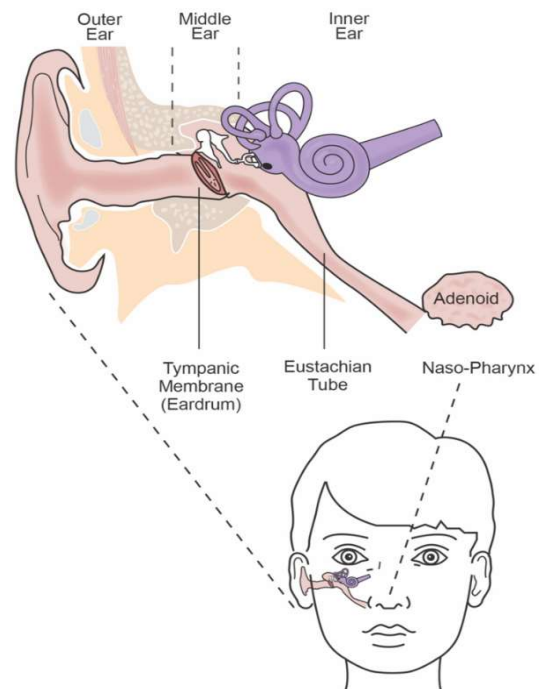
- hear speech sounds clearly
- learn new words
- listen in noisy places
- develop clear speech.

The Audiology and ENT teams will organise regular checks to monitor your child's hearing.

Speech development

Before palate repair, your child may have difficulty making speech sounds that need air pressure to build up inside the mouth, such as: p, b, t, and d. Some children may instead use sounds made further back in the throat. This is common in children with a cleft palate.

After palate repair, children gradually learn new speech sounds as they grow and practise talking. Some speech sounds may develop later than expected, particularly sounds that require stronger air pressure in the mouth.



Below is a general guide to the speech sounds children are often using at different ages:

Age	Sounds
Around 2 years	Children are often using early sounds like p, b, m, n, t, d
Around 3 years	Children are often using more sounds including k, g, f, h, w, y
Around 4 years	Children are using many sounds including s, z, sh, ch, j, l, ng
Around 5 years	Speech is easy to understand, even for unfamiliar people. Some sounds such as r, v, and th may still be developing
School age (5+ years)	Children continue refining later sounds and longer words. “th” may still be developing until around 8 years

The PCH Speech Pathology team will closely monitor your child’s speech development to make sure their speech skills are progressing in the right direction.

Language development

Language development refers to how children understand and use words to communicate.

Most children with a cleft palate develop language skills well, especially when hearing is monitored closely and families receive early support. Some children may need extra help if they:

- experience frequent hearing changes
- have speech that is difficult to understand
- have other medical or developmental needs.

Talking, reading, singing, and playing with your child every day are important ways to support language development.

Communication milestones

All children develop at their own pace. The milestones below are a general guide only.

Age	Your child may...
Around 6 months	Smile, laugh, make cooing and babbling sounds, turn towards voices and enjoy face to face interaction
Around 12 months	Babble using repeated sounds like “bababa” and mixed sounds like “bapa”, respond to their name, understand simple words, starts making first words such as “mama” or “dada”, and use gestures like pointing or waving
Around 18 months	Use around 20 words, try to copy words and sounds, follow simple instructions, enjoy songs, books, and play routines
Around 2 years	Use around 50 words or more, starts to put two words together, is beginning to be understood by familiar people, and enjoys simple conversations and pretend play
Around 3 years	Use short sentences, ask simple questions, is understood more clearly, use a wider range of speech sounds, and enjoy talking and playing with others



Helping your child at home

Early support makes a big difference. Simple everyday activities can help communication grow:

- talk during daily routines
- read books together
- sing songs and nursery rhymes
- copy your child's sounds
- pause and wait for your child to respond
- play face to face games.



Small moments every day help build speech and language skills.

When should I seek support?

Talk with your cleft team, GP, Child Health Nurse, or Speech Pathologist if you notice:

- your child is difficult to understand
- your child becomes frustrated when communicating
- your child isn't using many speech sounds
- you notice air coming through the nose during speech
- you're worried about your child's speech development.

Cleft Care team contacts

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the cleft team for support.

Clinical nurse specialist

Phone: (08) 6456 8132

Speech Pathology

Phone: (08) 6456 0414

Cleft administration

Phone: (08) 6456 4380

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