Phonological Disorders in Children

A phonological disorder is a deficit in the production of speech sounds. It may reflect an inability to articulate speech sounds correctly or to understand differences among speech sounds. Phonological disorders in children can result from physical or organic causes or may be functional in nature. Phonological disorders are among the most prevalent communication disabilities diagnosed in preschool and school-aged children, affecting 10% of this population. Children with phonological disorders are also at risk for reading and writing disabilities. If left unresolved, phonological disorders have long-term consequences that may interfere with an individual's future social, academic, and vocational well-being, largely resulting from persistent, reduced intelligibility of speech.

Clinical evidence has shown that children with phonological disorders benefit from treatment provided by speech-language pathologists. The benefits of effective phonological treatments have been widely documented in clinical and experimental studies dating from the 1960s. According to data collected from ASHA’s National Outcomes Measurement System (NOMS), 70% of preschool-aged children who received phonological treatment exhibited improved intelligibility and communication functioning. Moreover, approximately one half of the children who were unintelligible to familiar and/or unfamiliar people at the beginning of treatment progressed to a level where they were understandable to all listeners. The amount of treatment had a significant impact on outcome. The preschoolers who achieved intelligible speech received roughly twice as much treatment as those children who remained unintelligible.

The speech-language pathologist assesses the phonological disorder and develops a treatment plan to correct speech sound production. The goal of treatment is to improve accuracy and use of speech sounds to achieve maximum intelligibility in both single words and connected speech, as well as across all settings in which children communicate. There are a number of acceptable treatment approaches. A single treatment approach is not endorsed over others. Each clinically accepted method has been shown to result in improved accuracy and use of speech sounds.

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\(^\text{ii}\) ASHA National Center for Treatment Effectiveness in Communication Disorders (2003). ASHA Special Interest Division 1, Language Learning and Education; Steering Committee (July 2003).