

About Lispering

Just a little bit about lispering and why it shouldn't be a major concern early in life – not, for the most part, until late first grade, early second grade.

To make a clear /s/ sound, we typically place our tongue tip slightly against our topfront palate area (or bottom in some cases) making a slight 'u' shape. Air is passed forward through the small hole presented. The tongue should not protrude out of the mouth as this will produce a "th" sound – thus a lisp. Air should not flow over the sides of the tongue as this will produce the lateral or sloppy /s/ production of cartoon characters like Daffy Duck or Sylvester Cat.

Why wait until age 7 – 8 or late first, early second grade to be concerned? Simply because of nature. Children typically lose their top front teeth around 7 – 8 years. When those teeth are out of the mouth, there is a large gap remaining. Nothing will block the tongue from going out of the mouth for some speech productions. Thus we have the lispering Christmas song, "All I want for Chrithmath is my two front teeth!"

If a child receives speech therapy to correct a lisp prior to losing these teeth, it is likely they will need to repeat therapy after the permanent front teeth come in. Two times through therapy, though not unheard of, may not be fun for anyone. It is better practice to wait and let nature perform its miracle, waiting until the child's mouth is ready for therapy. The success rate will likely be higher.

Additionally, /s/ productions vary as to what proceeds or follows the /s/. In other words, 'es' is produced differently from 'os' vs. 'st'. /s/ is a very difficult sound to learn taking a long time to perfect. /s/ blends (ex. st, sp, sl) are much later to develop. A lot has to happen in the mouth very rapidly to make these blends. Typically, only one of the two consonants in the blend is formed at first (ex. /st/ blend may manifest as either /s/ or /t/ alone for first productions, thus you may hear a child say "top" or "sop" for "stop"). Blends may not be perfected until 7 years or late first grade. A very young child will make a wide variety of /s/ productions as they learn. It is NOT cause for concern (unless they substitute an odd sound such as /p/ for /s/).

It is important to listen to children as they learn speech and language skills. Major corrections vs. carefully stressed models can be detrimental. Allow your child to hear corrections, but try not to force or even request repeats.

Listen to a child's message - provide a corrected and stressed model and enjoy the conversation. They will listen!