

on call kids' health

Speech quirk?

Q My toddler has trouble saying her L's—they sound like Y's. Does she need speech therapy?

BY CLAIRE MCCARTHY, M.D. Codirector of Pediatrics at the Martha Elliot Health Center, in Jamaica Plain, MA, and a faculty member at Harvard Medical School. She's also busy raising four children.

A Difficulty pronouncing the sounds of l, r, z, v, th, ch, and sh is incredibly common in toddlers and preschoolers. My youngest, Natasha, had the worst time with L's, too. Our family got so used to it that we began to incorporate it into our own conversation—I found myself asking her what she wanted for “yunch” instead of lunch.

Most children will make the sounds properly by 4 or 5. (Trouble with “th”—e.g., saying “fum” instead of “thumb”—can persist until age 8, though it's rare and shouldn't be ignored until then.) For now, I wouldn't correct your daughter's speech or even bring attention to it; there's no point making her self-conscious about something that is essentially normal for a toddler. If she's still having problems in a year or so, however, you may want to work with her, showing her how to place her tongue in her mouth to make the l sound (the tongue goes behind the top

teeth)—you can try making a game out of it. If that doesn't help or

if she's having other difficulties speaking, you should take her to see a speech-language

pathologist (if your pediatrician can't refer one, check with your local school district or contact the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) at 800-638-8255 or www.asha.org).

The vast majority of such functional disorders can be treated with speech therapy if they don't go away on their own.

No smooth talker? Give her time



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