



# Time to speak up

Parents should seek professional help if they think their child is struggling with speech, writes **Lisa Mayoh**

**A**lmost one in five parents and teachers are concerned about a preschooler's speech — more than any other childhood issue including behaviour, social skills and independence. A study has found speech development and the way four-year-olds use sounds is of great concern to parents, although around two-thirds will not seek help.

The three-year government-funded Sound Start Study is a joint project by Charles Sturt

University, Sydney University and the University of the West of England, and will include assessments of 1250 subjects when it finishes next year.

Speech pathologist and Sydney University researcher

Elise Baker says in the first year of the study, researchers assessed 270 children and spoke to 497 parents and teachers, with results showing 17 per cent of parents were worried about their children's speech.

"From that we've found, around one in five parents and teachers are concerned about how children are talking and making their speech sounds," Dr Baker tells Kidspot Magazine.

"And at 17 per cent they were more concerned about that than any other area of development — concern about behaviour was seven per cent. We also looked at the way they use their fingers, hands, arms and legs, social skills and independence and they were all less than 5 per cent, so that 17 per cent really stands out."

Dr Baker says previous studies had shown that of parents who were concerned about their

child's ability to talk, only one-third would seek assessment.

"Which means there are two-thirds which aren't seeking the advice of a speech pathologist, and there were various reasons for that," she says.

"Some said they didn't have access, others said it was too far and some thought it wasn't needed — but we need to encourage parents so that they know how important it is to have nice, clear speech when a child starts school."

She says it was normal for toddlers aged about two to make pronunciation errors like saying "poon" for spoon or "wobots" for robots.

"When a child starts talking it is normal that they won't speak perfectly," Dr Baker says.

"But the most common age to identify problems is at four, when



they start preschool — they might come home and say, ‘They are not understanding me’ and some of the stories are quite heartbreaking.

“Their mum and dad have been their interpreters for so long and then they start preschool and it’s as though they’ve been dropped in a foreign country because their sound system isn’t being understood.

“That can cause emotional distress and social isolation, with 39 per cent of children with speech difficulties getting bullied on a weekly basis.”

She encourages parents to trust their instincts and seek advice if they have a concern.

Sefton mum Margaret Nekeare started noticing her son Ti-amoo, 5, was having trouble pronouncing certain words and letters last year.

“It didn’t go away so this year I started to get a bit concerned and thought we should go in and get some speech pathology, and it has really helped,” she said.

## Talking numbers

- 1.1 million Australians are estimated to have a communication disorder.
- One in five preschool children have a speech sound disorder.
- Parents and teachers are more concerned about preschoolers’ talking and ability to produce speech sounds than any other area of development.
- Almost two-thirds of parents don’t seek speech pathology services even though they are concerned.
- A quarter of children can wait over six months to receive an initial assessment.



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Ti-Amo Nekeare-Cowan, 5,  
with mum Margaret, is having  
speech therapy at Sydney  
University in Lidcombe.  
Picture: Tim Hunter