What is an SLP & What do they do?

Speech-language pathology is the scientific study of speech, fluency, feeding and swallowing, and all the mechanisms of speech and language, along with the therapeutic application of corrective and augmentative measures to help people with speech disorders speak and communicate better. It falls under the communication sciences and disorders discipline, which also include the closely aligned—but separate—study of audiology.

Speech-language pathology is focused on a range of human communication and swallowing disorders affecting people of all ages.

Speech-Language Pathology: The Synthesis of Two Fields of Study

Language differs from speech, which is why speech-language pathology is actually the study of two fields.

Speech is the verbal means of communication. It consists of:

Articulation: How speech sounds are made.

Voice: The use of breathing and vocal cords to produce sounds Fluency: The rhythm of speech.

Speech problems often occur because a person has difficulty producing sounds due to the incorrect movement of the lips, tongue, and mouth.

Speech problems include:

Childhood speech apraxia: Neurological childhood speech sound disorder resulting from neuromuscular difficulties, such as abnormal reflexes or abnormal tone

Adult speech apraxia: Speech disorder caused by neuromuscular difficulties, such as abnormal reflexes or abnormal tone; usually as a result of stroke, traumatic brain injury, dementia, or other progressive neurological disorders

Dysarthia: Impaired movement of the muscles used for speech production, including the vocal cords, tongue, lips, and/or diaphragm

Stuttering: Involuntary repetition of sounds

Speech sound disorders: Includes articulation and phonological processes difficulties***Orofacial myofunctional disorders***: Tongue moves forward in an exaggerated way during speech or swallowing (called tongue thrusts)

Voice disorders: Includes vocal cord nodules and polyps, vocal cord paralysis, spasmodic dysphonia, and paradoxical vocal fold movement

Language consists of socially shared rules that include how to put words together, how to make new words, what words mean, and what word combinations are best in what situations. Language disorders include:

- Difficulty understanding others: receptive language disorder
- Difficulty sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings: expressive language disorder

Although speech and language disorders can occur by themselves, they often exist together, which is why speech-language pathology is a combined field of study.

Speech and language disorders are often a result of medical conditions, such as:

- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)
- Dementia
- Huntington's Disease
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
- Laryngeal and oral cancers
- Right hemisphere brain injury
- Stroke
- Traumatic brain injury

In children, this may also include selective mutism and language-based learning disabilities resulting from:

- Autism
- Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- Syndromes, such as Down's syndrome and Fragile X syndrome
- Cerebral palsy
- Failure to thrive
- Low birth weight or premature birth
- Hearing loss
- Intellectual disabilities
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder
- Stroke/brain injury
- Tumors
- Cleft lip/palate

What is a Speech-Language Pathologist?

Speech-language pathologists evaluate, diagnose, and treat speech, language, communication, and swallowing disorders. These highly trained clinicians work as part of a collaborative, interdisciplinary team of professionals, which includes physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, teachers, physicians, audiologists, and psychologists, among others.

Their job duties include:

Developing and implementing treat plans based on their professional assessment and recommendation from members of the interdisciplinary team

Monitoring their patients' progress and adjusting their treatment plans accordingly

Documenting patient care and writing reports regarding patient evaluation, treatment, progress, and discharge

Ordering, conducting, and evaluating hearing, speech, and language tests and examinations

Educating patients and family members on treatment plans, communication techniques, and strategies for coping with speech/language barriers

Designing, developing, and employing diagnostic and communication devices or strategies

Developing and implementing speech and language programs

The History of Speech-Language Pathology

Speech-pathology as a recognized field of study had its origins in the early part of the twentieth century, when the scientific, academic, and clinical foundations began to take shape and a number of organizations (such as the American Academy of Speech Correction in 1926) focused on speech disorders and speech correction were established.

From 1945 to 1965, speech-language pathology began to evolve, thanks to the introduction of a number of assessment and therapy approaches focused on underlying communication disorders. It was during this time that speech-language pathology researchers and clinicians began focusing their attention on the many WWII soldiers returning from war with brain injuries resulting in aphasia.

This period also gave rise to brain studies, technological advances, and the development of standardized testing procedures, including receptive and expressive language assessment and treatment techniques.

Between 1965 and 1975, advancements in linguistics spurred researchers to begin distinguishing language disorders from speech disorders. Their work enhanced the work of speech-language pathologists, allowing them to begin more effectively treating a variety of language delays and disorders.

Today, speech-language pathology continues to evolve as high-quality research evidence is integrated into practitioner expertise and clinical decision making. The increased national and international exchange of professional knowledge, information, and education in communication sciences and disorders continues to strengthen research collaboration and improve clinical services.