

## TV blamed for rise in child-speech problems

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TOO much television and the death of conversation in the family home are contributing to an alarming rise in the number of children starting school without basic language skills.

While Australian children used to pick up language skills from dinner table conversation, these days their oral abilities are lacking and an increasing number are being referred to speech pathologists.

"The speech problems we're encountering now would be far greater than they've ever been," Australian Primary Principals Association president Leonie Trimper told *The Sunday Age*.

"It's not necessarily an increase in children with severe speech issues; it's more around a delayed speech development — they're behind for their expected stage of development, or they're having a few specific problems," she said.

Ms Trimper said the association's evidence of increasing language difficulties was anecdotal but it was "the one thing principals say they have noticed the largest increase in".

She believes the increase is linked to changes in family life.

"Families aren't sitting around the dinner table any more every night talking about what's happened during the day and engaging with the children," Ms Trimper said.

"Children are sitting in front of televisions more and computers playing computer games. It's dinner in front of the television, video games after dinner, or parents both working and time poor — all those issues have to impact on children."

Child psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg agrees children are no longer spending as much time talking with adults.

"There is good data to show that the more often you sit around a dining room table and have a conversation around a meal, the better the language development of children," he said.

Psychologists in Britain were running a campaign called Back to the Table to try to get families to share meals together around a table on a regular basis.

A spokeswoman for the Education Department said data on the number of children in primary schools being referred to speech pathologists was not available and would have to be collected from individual schools.

But Education Department speech pathologist Fran Callinan said her own statistics showed the number of children being referred to speech pathologists had doubled in the past 25 years.

"In the early '80s you'd manage 60 to 70 kids and then you'd have 25 to 30 kids on the waiting list. The last figures I had from 2006, speech pathologists were managing around 120 to 130 kids and the waiting lists were still 25 to 30." She believes the increase in referrals is partly due to higher detection rates.

"Teachers are far better trained and the department has put in place a whole lot of teaching practices which enable teachers to identify problems," she said.

Ms Callinan said there was a greater focus on oral language in the classroom and teachers were also conducting more assessments of children.

She believes societal changes have resulted in some children having less exposure to talk. "Children learn from what they hear, what they see and what they do, with other people. They might see and hear a computer but it doesn't talk back, there's nobody else there, so they're not getting practice in talking."

Some of the problems she encounters in children include students using the wrong sounds. "So instead of 'car' they say 'tar'. 'I can go in the tar.'"

She also sees children with grammar problems. "A child of seven was saying 'her my mummy' instead of 'she is my mummy'."

There are also issues with phonological awareness — the ability to listen and analyse sounds in words. "I asked a seven-year-old boy to tell me a word that rhymes with 'cat' and 'sat' and he said 'fall'."

Professor Sheena Reilly is head of research at the Royal Children's Hospital speech pathology department and is nearing the end of a five-year study of how language develops.

From her research so far, Professor Reilly says there is "absolutely no reason why we'd suddenly have an increase" in the number of children with language difficulties.

"I don't believe that there's any evidence that language problems are increasing, (but) that doesn't mean to say they aren't being brought to people's attention more," she said.

Professor Reilly said there were complex factors that caused a language disorder. "The strong drivers of language disorder are biological — they're genetic and to do with how children's brains develop. Later the environment and interaction is important in terms of building vocabulary and richness of language."

## **Learning to speak**

**By the age of five your child should be able to:**

- **Use sentences of about six words with correct grammar.**
- **Talk about events that are happening, have happened or might happen.**
- **Explain why something happens.**
- **Explain the function of objects.**
- **Follow three directions. For example, stand up, get your shoes and wait by the door.**
- **Say how they feel and tell you their ideas.**
- **Become interested in writing, numbers and reading.**
- **Speak clearly enough to be understood.**
- **Understand opposites, such as high and low, wet and dry.**