

ANNA JOSE @Kochi

KARTHIK (name changed) was three-months-old when he was diagnosed with Downs Syndrome. His seizures were hard to control with regular medications. Soon he began to lose his communication skills owing to the seizures. "At that point, steroids were the best treatment option," said Dr Darshan Jayaram Das, senior consultant in neurology at Rajagiri Hospital, Ernakulam, who treated Karthik. "There was some hesitation from the family members due to a lot of myths and fears about giving steroids to children. This caused a delay in starting treatment. But eventually, the family agreed, and thankfully, the child responded very well."

The abnormal brain activity affecting Karthik's speech development improved significantly, and so did his language and communication skills. "Steroids can be very effective when used for the right condition, in the right dose, and with careful monitoring," Dr Das added. "In this case, a combination of proper medical treatment, speech therapy, and stimulation really helped improve the child's language development."

Speech and language development involve two key components — receptive and expressive language. "Expression will be effective only if reception is intact. In some children, both receptive and expressive language may be delayed, while in others, only expressive language is affected. For expressive language to develop properly, hearing must be normal. We learn by hearing, and then we learn to express ourselves. If there's any hearing issue — whether genetic or acquired — speech development may be delayed, so hearing should be tested," he said.

The study 'Speech and language delay in children: Prevalence and risk factors', published in the Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care in 2019, found that the prevalence of speech and language delay is 2.53%. The medical risk factors associated with this are birth asphyxia, seizure disorder, and oropharyngeal deformity. The familial causes include low parental education, consanguinity, positive family history, multilingual environment, and inadequate stimulation. However, with early detection and intervention, the condition is reversible in most cases.

According to Dr Premila Harimohan, consultant, Child Development Centre at Amrita Hospital, Kochi, of late, there have been several cases where young children are presenting with delayed speech, short attention span, reduced eye contact, and poor name-call response. "There are many causes, including underlying neurological developmental disorders, genetic factors, and global developmental delays that contribute to delayed speech and

Major symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder in children

1 Impaired socialisation and interaction
They may have poor name-call response, inconsistent eye contact, less attention, solitary play, etc

2 Impaired communication (verbal and non-verbal)
They usually have need-based communication and may pull the caregiver to the place of need or use gestures or actions to express their needs

3 Stereotyped behaviour
Repeating words or phrases, showing more interest in moving objects or parts of objects

SPEECH DELAY

FULLY CURABLE IF THERAPY IS STARTED EARLY



language development. One reason for speech delay is the nuclear family system, especially in cities with both parents working and not many people at home to interact with the child. The child spends more time with gadgets, including mobile phones and television. Also, they mimic sounds and imitate characters seen in the cartoon films," she said. "In a small percentage of children, speech delay may be associated with conditions like autism. These children may also show other symptoms of autism, such as difficulties with social interaction, poor eye contact, sensory issues, and repetitive behaviours," she emphasised.

Early identification, intervention

In case there is a delay in speech, it is important to consult a developmental paediatrician

or neurologist to make a diagnosis and rule out medical conditions, added Dr Premila.

"An assessment needs to be done by the early intervention team, including an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, a clinical psychologist, etc. The therapists can help the schools to improve attention span, eye contact and greatly help the child with speech and language delay," she said.

According to Dr Darshan, early identification and intervention are crucial. "If a child shows any signs of delay, parents should seek medical advice as early as possible. Some children may need speech therapy, while others might benefit from increased stimulation at home. The approach depends on the individual child. Diagnosis and timely intervention lead to better outcomes," he said. The type of ther-

apy or treatment depends on the underlying condition. "In some cases, particularly when speech delay is linked to other disorders, medical treatment may also be necessary. For example, in rare conditions such as epilepsy-aphasia syndromes, speech regression can occur due to abnormal electrical activity in the brain. In such cases, treatment with anti-seizure medications can help control the abnormal brain activity and lead to improvements in language development," Dr Darshan added.

Screen for hearing

"Earlier, when a child was born with a hearing loss or impairment, the diagnosis was made at the age of two or three. By that time, all the valuable years the child needed to learn through hearing were gone, and the child could never learn to speak, and mostly used sign language to communicate. But now routine hearing screening is done in all newborns and has helped in detecting hearing loss as early as possible," said Dr Premila.

"Children need to hear to learn to speak. If there is a hearing impairment or related issues, a hearing aid should be used. It helps in improving speech and language development," said Daisy Sebastian, coordinator, academic, and intervention programme at the National Institute of Speech and Hearing in Thiruvananthapuram.

Don't wait, therapy is good

Dr Premila said that if there is any delay in developmental milestones, it is very important that treatment and therapy are started soon. The early years of child development are a critical period for learning as that is when the maximum brain development occurs. "Parents should not wait for the child to develop the milestones, including speech and language. There is no harm in starting therapy, as it does not have any side effects. It is only a push for the child to attain the milestones, including speaking faster," she emphasised.

Role of parents

"Therapists can only guide. The parents have a more important role to play. Children ac-

quire skills at home. Better communication helps them develop skills... Parents should spend quality time with their kids, especially before the age of three," Daisy added.

"Primary teachers should also make efforts to help the child with delayed speech development interact with other students and should motivate other children to interact with the child who speaks less," Dr Premila said.

In most cases, speech therapy is sufficient — especially when speech delay results from neurological or intellectual challenges. "But therapy alone is not enough. The training of

parents and teachers is equally important. Clinical therapy is limited in time, whereas most learning happens at home. Parents need to be informed, proactive, and consistent in reinforcing therapy techniques. In cases of hearing impairment, hearing aids or cochlear implants can significantly improve both hearing and subsequent speech and language development," Dr Darshan emphasised.

According to Daisy, socialisation after the age of four is important. "The environment, engagement with other children of similar age, games, and learning at school become important after the age of four. Socialising with a group of similar

age and teachers can help the child develop skills," she said.

Impact of Covid?

About the notion that delayed speech in children increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown, Daisy said most children were dependent on gadgets, cartoons, and other technologies which may have contributed to speech delays.

Dr Premila said lack of social stimulation could have indirectly affected development. Pointing out that parents had more time to spend with children during the pandemic as they were working from home, she also noted that the children had less social stimulation as they were not going to school in person and were instead mostly using laptops or mobile phones to attend lessons. "So that could have indirectly affected the development," she said.

SYMPTOMS OF SPEECH DELAY

Delay in babbling and first words

Trouble understanding

Difficulty in structuring words and sentences

Seek professional help

Undergo hearing screening at the earliest

Consult a pediatrician or neurologist if child presents with symptoms

Seek professional help from speech therapists and audiologists