

Simple & Effective Therapy

Decoding Therapy: Phonemic Training Program

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What to do about DEC

Decoding (DEC) is, no doubt, the most important single AP category. If a person can't understand what was said, oral communications (e.g., understanding the teacher, comprehending over the phone etc.) are adversely affected. DEC underlies our speech and oral language development and enables us to read and spell effectively.

Speech sounds are imprinted in our temporal lobes (auditory cortex) early in life and babbled back at an early age. As we build upon this encoded base and we are able to understand more complex auditory information. And with further central nervous system maturation along with consistent auditory input our efficiency of processing improves so we are able to communicate more and expand our fund of knowledge. We are also able to combine information from other senses and systems, such as vision and language, to enable effective reading and spelling skills.

Because of the vital part DEC plays in such functions as understanding directions and learning to read a DEC problem is likely to come to the attention of parents and teachers before some of the other types of APD.

Signs of DEC difficulty are often seen in young children especially when they have other issues (e.g., Autism or ADHD) that bring them to SLPs or other professionals. Likely for these reasons it is generally the most common APD category that we see, whether we are SLPs or audiologists.

When one has DEC issues this makes all listening more difficult and therefore is likely to accentuate short-term auditory memory, speech in noise, sequencing and Integration (INT) problems/ tasks. For these reasons we generally address DEC first in therapy, although for practical purposes, and to expedite therapy, we often address other basic issues at the same time.

Our philosophy is to remediate the basic issues so we can then more easily remediate the associated issues. Charles Van Riper (the famous and amazing SLP of old) advocated this approach back in the 1950s and I believe it's even truer today. This is because in those days we worked at a rather basic level before SLPs addressed problems of language and literacy (much of which are dependent on basic auditory processing).

Phonemic Training Program (PTP)

Many of you are already familiar with PTP or are even using this approach. It is so simple and so effective in retraining the brain that it can help those with vague or inaccurate information encoded in their temporal lobes. Because it is so basic and can be used with very young children as well as severely mentally challenged individuals (and many others with severe DEC deficits.) It is a perfect approach with which to begin. However it does take a little time to become facile with it (as noted by Kris Ericson in a recent posting on the Simple and Effective Therapy website).



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Which sounds to teach and when

We would like to clarify or correct the concepts stored in the auditory cortex for the sounds of our language that may be vague, distorted or overlap with other sounds? The general procedure is to teach 4 sounds per session (or per week) so as not to overload individuals who have DEC problems. The 4 sounds should not pose a discrimination challenge with one another either auditorily or visually (if possible). However, because the sounds that are trained in the first session are, for the most part are reinforced throughout the therapy, we start with the ones which are among the most problematic. Some of the common early sounds are presented in this order: /d/, short-e, /l/ and /m/ at the first session.

I get my PTP cards as well as Focus and Itch cards from a graphic artist (Denise Dian <denisediandisigns@sbcglobal.net>). She will be happy to make up a copy for each or any of these decks at a reasonable price.

Equipment and materials

The only equipment needed for PTP is:

- a) perhaps an hoop (such as seen on the cover of my therapy book) with fabric attached or any other device to obscure just the view of the patient and
- b) a deck of cards with the letters symbolizing the sounds to be trained.

The three PTP steps

For practical purposes the 3 steps are generally presented in the following order: **Brief Review, General Review and Introduction Without Bias (IWB)**. However, we only have one step the first session and 2 the second, so they don't follow the usual order.

The regular sequence we start to use in the third session. In the first session start with IWB (it's the only one), for the second session there is a Brief Review of the previous 4 and then **IWB**.

Introduction Without Bias (IWB): Tell the person that you will be saying a sound a few times but they are not to say anything. With visual cues obscured by the hoop, clearly say /d...d.....d/. Without the hoop and showing the card with 'D' on it, indicate, "That was the /d/ sound that you hear in words like day, dog and had." Then explain that every time you say the /d/ sound they should point to this card. Say /d/ and the person points; then repeat a few times. Now introduce foils. "What if I said /s/, there is no /s/ card showing so I want you to point over here (over to one side) to let me know that I didn't fool you". Then give the /d/ again and after the person points give an obvious foil to train that response. A foil is to force the person to listen to all the sounds but is not meant to be a close contrast to the sounds that are showing. Now take away the D-card and introduce the next sound. Further instruction is not needed except you can say

"Listen" and then put up the hoop and say the next sound (e.g., short-e). After pointing a few times we are ready for Discrimination of the first 2 sounds. Bring back the D-card and have both cards showing. Say one sound and have the person point and then the other. Take away the 2 cards and train the third as before and the Discrimination of the first 3 sounds. You may wish to throw in a foil about this time. Teach the fourth sound and then contrast.

Brief Review (BR): At the next session you should start off with a BR of the four sounds from the first lesion in the same order as before. There is usually no need to mention words with the sound. Remove the cards. For this second session we now introduce the four new sounds using IWB as the last step as before as we want to solidify the sounds they know before bringing in new material.

General Review (GR): This is always given after the IWB step and unlike the 2 previous steps this contains all of the sounds that were previously in BR. So the third week we start the GR and generally add four sounds each week after that. When there are about 20 sounds in GR start to take out about 2 to 4 easy sounds a week to keep the most important ones but not have too many cards/sound. In GR we do not have the cards in any particular order (basically mixed up randomly). Take the first 4 cards and spread them out all at once in front of the person and do the Discrimination task. When done just slide them back toward yourself so they are out of play and put down the next 4 cards. When they are discriminated bring back the first 4 so they are in 2 rows and discriminate all 8. Then retire the first 4 cards and pull back the second 4. Now put out the next 4 cards and so on. In this way the GR is with 4 cards and then 8, then 4 and 8 again etc.

When two sounds are confused

Although PTP generally goes smoothly most children will demonstrate a few confusions that could be ameliorated with a few minutes for a few sessions with the “Focus-Pocus” procedure. This pits the 2 contenders against one another in order to teach the distinction.

Focus: The purpose is first to strengthen the easier/better one and then to strengthen the poorer one. For example, /m/ and /n/ are common mistakes for those with DEC issues. So we take a minute or 2 on a few successive sessions to straighten this out. Put the M- and N-cards in front of the person. Say something like, “This is the /m/ and this is the /n/. When I say /m/ I want you to point to this card and when I say /n/ please point to this card. I will start with M-card, I will say /m/ three times and then will say the /n/. Please point each time.” Since you have just told the person what you will be doing there is a very good chance that the response will be correct. Then say, “Now I’m always going to say the /m/ first but I won’t tell you how many times.” You can start with 2 or 3 /m/ presentations and then /n/. You are not trying to trick or even test them, rather you are just doing auditory stimulation and training – providing repetition and just expecting them to know when you say the sound that is not the easier /m/. After presenting /m/s and /n/ a few more times, go on to something else – too much of this can lead to confusion. A total of 3 or 4 trials of /m/ and /n/ would be ideal.

In some cases if it was quite easy; the next time you can switch to the /n/ for the first three times and then /m/. However, if there were some slow responses or the person appeared unsure then do it the same way the next time (but vary the number of /n/s 1 to 4 times). When you are ready to ‘switch’ to /n/ first, that session you can say, “This time I am going to say the /n/ first. I will say it 3 times and...”

Itch Cards

I also use some key-word cards that are called *Itch cards* (just to add a little humor). The Itch words are meant to be easy to recall (e.g., dessert, robot and mud for d, r and m). I often introduce them with a little story or some information that makes it easier for them to recall. For example, “My *favorite* word is *MUD*”.

Itch cards: Because we start with hard sounds in PTP and there are very few sounds the first session or two; Itch cards are useful for these sounds. I put the ‘dessert’ card in front of the person and I say, “When I say /d/ I want you to point to dessert and say ‘dessert’.” After one or two tries take it away and introduce the ‘elephant’ card for the short-e. Do the same training and then bring back the dessert card and discriminated them. Then do the same for the other two sounds.

I believe you will find other uses for Itch cards; for example, if Focus does not work well enough you can try Itch cards, but don’t limit yourself to just the two sounds. Add at least one and preferably two other sounds. With PTP, Focus and Itch cards the person will hear individual phonemes many times and associate them visually.

I think you will find PTP extremely effective. I have 4 decks of PTP cards, 3 decks of Focus cards and 2 decks of Itch cards so I can set them up for each child in advance. Let me know if you have any questions.