



The 'Z' Sound

Welcome to 'z' practice! We believe that parents and caregivers are a child's best teacher and there are many things that you can do at home to improve your child's communication skills.

Developmental Norms:

Most¹ children produce the 'z' sound correctly by 7 years of age in initial, medial, and final position of words.

- 1 Age at which at least 90% of children produced the sound correctly in all word positions. (Adapted norms from The Goldman Fristoe Test of Articulation-2)

*For s-blends, please see the separate S-Blends page!

Position:

- *Initial position of words* (the sound occurs at the beginning of the word): **zoo, zero, zebra, zip, zig zag**
- *Medial position of words* (the sound occurs in the middle of the word): **puzzle, lizard, music, dessert, buzzing**
- *Final position of words* (the sound occurs at the end of the word): **boys, babies, hose, keys**

*Remember, that the /z/ sound may not be written as a letter "z". For example, the "s" in "pigs" is said as the /z/ sound, and the "x" in "Alexander" has the /z/ sound in it too. Don't get tricked by how it is written, just listen to how it sounds!



How to make the “z” sound:

The "z" sound is made the same way as the "s" sound, other than your voice is turned on to make the air "buzz."

- The mouth is slightly open, the tongue is raised high in the mouth to almost touch the alveolar ridge - the spot in your mouth located right behind your two front teeth. When this happens, a groove is created in the center of the tongue; this is where the air stream flows. The /z/ sound has a buzzing quality to it because the tongue groove constricts the space through which the breath travels.
- The lips are pulled back into a smile- lips are NOT rounded.
- The voice is turned on.

[Click to watch on YouTube: Demonstration of how to produce ‘Z’](#)

How to provide feedback for /z/:

BE SPECIFIC!

When the sound was produced correctly: “That was a great ‘z’ sound!” OR “I really heard your ‘buzzing’ sound when you said ‘zoo.’ Great job!”

When the sound was produced incorrectly: “Oops! You forgot the ‘z’ sound,” OR “I saw your tongue sticking out! Remember to pull your tongue in and keep your teeth together!”

You can give the sound a fun name. For example, the 'z' sound could be called the "buzzing bee sound" or the "zipper sound." Feel free to get creative and find a name for the sound that works best for your child!





How often should I be practicing with my child?

A useful analogy is to compare working on speech sounds to playing a video game. In many video games, there are different levels that need to be completed or mastered in a sequence.

The length of time a child stays on one level varies greatly from child to child, and can be impacted by a number of factors. These factors include:

- The amount of cueing needed to elicit the sound correctly - we call this *stimulability*. If a child can produce a sound given proper cueing techniques, they are said to be stimuable to produce that sound. Gradually, over time, we can fade the cues so that the child can make the sound by themselves.
- Attention span: A child who is able to focus on practicing his or her speech sound, pay attention to the cues given, and pay attention to their own production is likely to make progress more quickly than a child who might struggle with attention and focus.

If you feel that your child is not making progress as expected, please contact your school speech-language pathologist for more guidance in this area.

How to Master a Level?

For most 'levels', your child will be ready to move on once he or she is able to produce the sound at that level with 80% accuracy. You don't need to keep track of how your child is doing on each task unless you want to. You can simply estimate approximately how well your child is doing. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact your school's speech-language pathologist.

Reps: 1 – 2 Activities/Practice sessions per day

Duration: 5 – 15 minutes

Levels:

- Level One: Isolation (e.g., the sound all by itself → “z”)
- Level Two: Syllable (e.g., “zee”)
- Level Three: Word (e.g., “zebra”)
- Level Four: Phrase (e.g., “funny zebra”)
- Level Five: Sentence (e.g., “I need to do up my zipper.”)



- Level Six: Conversation (e.g., the sound in everyday conversation)

Why Practice? It's Like Exercise!

Think of practicing speech sounds as similar to exercising or lifting weights. If you start off by learning correct form, exercising every day, and gradually increasing the difficulty or weight, you will be able to make great progress towards your fitness goal! The same goes for working on speech sounds. We start by showing a child how to properly produce the sound. Then, we work with the child on saying the sound on its own (isolation), then in syllables (la, lee, lie, low, Lou). After that, we target the sound at the word level- beginning, end, middle, and in consonant blends. Gradually, we move to producing the sound at the sentence level, and then at the conversational level.



Short But Often!

Researchers have found that shorter but more frequent practice sessions are **more effective** than longer but less frequent sessions. For this reason, I recommend that you try to sneak in as many short sessions as you can throughout your week. The more you practice, the faster your child will progress. A few 5-minute sessions a day is a great place to start, but you can always do fewer if it doesn't fit into your schedule. Try practicing while driving in the car, while standing in line, or while waiting for a doctor's appointment to get in a few extra repetitions.

Phonological Processes for /z/:

A *phonological process* is a typical error pattern that young children use to simplify an adult speech sound they are not able to say. In the case of the /z/ sound, one error that children may exhibit is something called *stopping*. In this error pattern, the child substitutes a stop consonant that has no airflow, such as /d/ or /t/, for the /z/ sound, which



needs to be produced with continuous airflow. When they do they say "doo" or "too" for "zoo", "dipper" or "tipper" for "zipper", and "but" or "bud" for "buzz".

Stopping is NOT a typical pattern that babies and young children demonstrate as they are learning to talk. It is a red flag for an articulation disorder and is often something that needs to be addressed by a speech-language pathologist (SLP).

Tips for working on stopping at home:

Be Specific: tell your children that they are stopping their air instead of letting their air flow out of their mouth to make the /z/ sound.

Give an Example: give your children examples of their errors (e.g. "You said *dipper* when you meant to say *zipper*").

Provide a Model: have your child look closely at your mouth as you model the /z/ sound all by itself, not in a word, and point out how the tip of your tongue is staying DOWN, away from the back of your front teeth, and how you are letting your air keep going.

Use a Tactile Aid: run your finger down your child's arm when you stretch out the /z/ sound, and then tap your finger on your child's arm when you make the /d/ sound so he can feel the difference between a stop sound and one that is made with continuous airflow.

Buzz like a bee: you can talk about how /z/ is the "buzzing" sound, and you and your child can try to hiss like a snake when you make the "zzzzz" sound. Really stretch out the sound to emphasize the concept of continuous airflow.

Does my child have a lisp?:

A *lisp* is not a phonological process error, but it is a very common error pattern that many young children exhibit. A lisp, also called a *frontal lisp* or an *interdental lisp*, refers to insertion of the tongue between the front teeth during production of the /s/ and the /z/ sound. Some children even manage to make other sounds, including /sh/, /ch/ and /j/ with a tongue protrusion pattern.



A little bit of tongue protrusion during /s/ and /z/ production is quite common in babies when they first learn to talk, and typically they learn to keep their tongue back as they gain more control of the muscles involved in speaking. However, many children continue to put their tongue between their teeth for the /s/ and /z/ sounds, and schools are full of students of all ages who have a lisp! Although lisps are considered to be "cosmetic" problems that don't affect one's ability to be understood, they are visually distracting and can make one's speech sound a little muffled. Lisps are very easy to work on at home since they are a highly visible error. Keep reading for tips on working on lisps at home.

Tips for working on a lisp at home:

- **Be Specific:** tell your children that they are sticking out their tongue instead of closing their teeth to make the /z/ sound. If they are a little older, tell them it sounds like they are making a /th/, not an /z/, when they stick out their tongue.
- **Give an Example:** give your children examples of their errors (e.g. "You said thoo when you meant to say zoo").
- **Provide a Model:** have your child look closely at your mouth as you model the /z/ sound all by itself, not in a word, and point out how your tongue is staying BACK, away from the back of your front teeth, when you make an /z/ sound.
- **Use a Mirror:** look in a mirror that is big enough for both your face and your child's face as you both make the /z/ sound by itself, not in a word. Tell your child, "I saw your tongue – see if you can see mine". Make a few /z/ sounds with your tongue coming out and see if your child can catch you when your tongue accidentally comes out.
- **Remember to Relax:** an interdental lisp is a MILD, cosmetic problem, that does not affect the intelligibility of your child's speech. Many successful adults in all types of work have a lisp. It is not something to be overly worried about.

Why does my child's speech sound slushy?:

When a child's speech sounds slushy, as if they are talking from the sides of their mouth, they may have something called a *lateral lisp*, also called a *lateral distortion*. This slushy distortion occurs when children push their tongue up against the roof of their mouth, thereby forcing the airflow to leak out the sides of the mouth. Lateral distortions can be evident on the following sounds: /s/, /z/, /sh/, /ch/, /j/, /tr/, /dr/.

Lateral distortions are not a typical developmental pattern and are not something your child will outgrow. As with an interdental or frontal lisp, a child who has a lateral distortion is still understandable, though the distortion is highly noticeable, especially if several of the



above sounds are affected. Lateral distortions are usually very difficult for parents to correct at home. It is recommended that you have your child assessed by an SLP if you think he has a lateral distortion. Sometimes even with speech therapy, students need to be a little older, in grade 3 and above, before therapy is successful.

Tips for working on lateral distortion at home:

Lateral distortions are often very difficult to remediate, even for an SLP! Especially when children are younger than 6-7 years of age, it can be very difficult for them to learn how to completely change the positioning of their tongue in order to re-direct their airflow from the sides of their mouth to the center of their mouth.

Following are a few suggestions that explain the physical positioning of the tongue for non-lateralized airflow. If they don't work with your child, don't stress! Leave it to the professionals and contact your school SLP for support.

Be Specific: tell your children that they are pushing their tongue up, and that this is making the air leak out the sides of their mouth when they make the /s/ sound.

Give an Example: try to replicate your child's distortion by pushing your tongue up against the roof of your mouth when you make an /s/ sound (think Daffy Duck!). Then make the /s/ sound the correct way and notice what your tongue is doing differently. You can try to explain this difference by saying that your tongue is like a "bowl" when you make /s/ correctly. The edges are up but the center stays down. When you make a lateral distortion, your tongue is like a "hat". The edges are down and the center goes up. Tell your child how your mouth feels when you make your /s/ sound like this.

Use a Tactile Aid: use a baby spoon and place it on the front and center of your child's tongue – not too far back. Gently push your child's tongue down into the bowl shape, so the middle is down and the edges are up. See if he can produce the /s/ sound by itself, not in a word. You will notice that the spoon goes up right away because the tongue is a very strong muscle and your child is used to pushing his tongue up. Remind him to try not to push up against the spoon and to let the spoon stay DOWN, away from the roof of his mouth.

Start with a /t/: sometimes SLPs have success "shaping" a non-lateral /s/ by having the



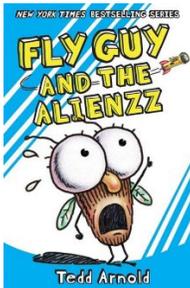
child start by making a soft, gentle /t/ sound and trying to stretch the sound out. A slow, stretched out /t/ will sometimes end up like this: tsssssss. If you do hear a non-slushy /s/ sound, gradually eliminate the beginning /t/ sound.

Remember to Relax: though lateral distortions are noticeable, they do not affect the intelligibility of your child's speech. Many successful adults in all types of professions have lateral distortions.

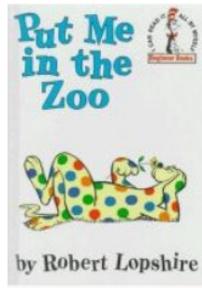
Learning with Games

- **Superheroes!** Create your own superhero stories and act them out/draw them. Use sound-effect words, such as "Zip!", "Zap!", "Zoom!"
- **Play Zookeeper!**
- **Honey Bee Tree:** The Honey Bee Tree board game is a version of Kerplunk. Take turns pulling the sticks out and try not to let the honey bees fall! As each person is slowly pulling the stick out on their turn then can practice drawing out their long, buzzing /z/ sound!

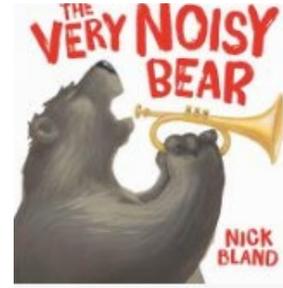
Sound-Loaded Books: Z



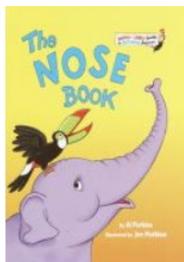
Fly Guy and the Alienz



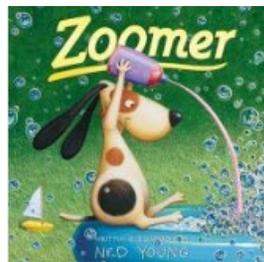
Put Me in the Zoo



The Very Noisy Bear



The Nose Book



Zoomer



I Like Bugs



Helpful Websites

- [Practical Speech Therapy Activities for Home Practice](#)
- [Working Speech and Language into Daily Routines](#)
- [Fun Family Crafts](#)
- [Printables for Kids: KizClub](#)

Songs Featuring 'Z'

- [Youtube: We're Going to the Zoo](#)
- [Youtube: Little Zebra Lost His Stripes!](#)
- [Youtube: Bumblebee \(Buzz Buzz\)](#)

Z Crafts

- [Buzzing Bee](#)
- [Z Zipper](#)
- [Paper Plate Zebra](#)