

<Mary Miele:

Welcome to Be Evolved, a podcast for parents and educators who prioritize developing, possibility and expansion within the total educational process for themselves and their children or students. We invite you to listen to the podcast with your child or student in mind and with yourself at the center of the learning experience. Ultimately, our goal is to bridge the gap between educational expertise and research, translating it into practical action. Gaining knowledge plus taking action is what it means to be evolved.

Hello everyone and welcome to Be Evolved. I'm your host Mary Neely, and today we have a fantastic panel of speech and language therapists joining us. Our guests are experts in the field and they're dedicated to helping school age children achieve their full potential in speech and language development. They will be sharing valuable insights, strategies, and tips on how to support the assessment and development of children's speech and language skills.

Before we dive into our discussion, I want to introduce you to our esteemed panelists. The first panelist we'll be hearing from is Katie Stricker. Then we will hear from Kim Kramer. And finally we will hear from Melissa Wexler Gurfein. So, let's jump right in and start our conversations. So we're going to start off by hearing from Katie Stricker and I'm going to have Katie introduce herself and then I'm going to ask a few questions. Okay? So, welcome Katie.

Katie Stricker:

Hi, thank you so much. My name's Katie Stricker and I work full-time in private practice. My private practice is called Mindful Speech and Learning, and we are based in Lower Manhattan in New York City. And before this I worked in a combination of private schools and public schools throughout New York and the DC area.

<Mary Miele:

Amazing. Well, thank you so much for being with us. Really, the purpose as I mentioned to you guys before this call today is to get your expertise and really help parents to understand a little bit more about speech and language and what they can be doing to understand their children's speech and language, and then also what are some ways that they can act and go forward to promote this piece of important development. So, to start off with, Katie, I hope you can tell us a little bit about some of the most common speech and language challenges that you encounter when working with school aged children.

Katie Stricker:

Yes, absolutely. So, the field of speech pathology is very vast, but in my practice the most common areas I see are speech sound challenges, both articulation errors like a single sound error like an R or a lisp, or phonological errors with sound substitutions. I also see children with expressive and receptive language challenges, which often looks like difficulty with using specific vocabulary, telling stories in a sequential and organized manner, or understanding academic content, or even following along in conversations. I also specialize in literacy at my practice, so I work with many children that are struggling with reading and writing, and then I help with all aspects of that process from phonics to decoding to fluency and reading comprehension.

<Mary Miele:

Amazing. I see all of that also in our work here at Evolved, and I know also that maybe the other panelists might have some crossover or maybe there's some differentials. I would like to just go a little off book here if you don't mind, Kim and Melissa. Would you be able to add or expand on different challenges that you're seeing in your practice? Kim, why don't you go ahead and start and then I'll go to you, Melissa.

Kim Kramer:

Thank you, Mary. I'm also seeing similar challenges with my students in my practice as Katie is seeing as well, I am seeing after COVID some of these kids who were home and stuck on iPads as their parents were working, they are now hitting the preschool years, and they were not socialized when they were in their younger years when it was really important to learn social skills and how to cooperate and play well with others. And specifically I'm seeing a lot of issues with preschool students who either do not have a robust vocabulary for their age, do not have the listening skills that are needed in the classroom, and do not have the play skills that are needed to be a valuable member of the classroom.

<Mary Miele:

Yes, makes sense. And I'm also seeing some of that coming into some of the pre-kindergarten skills that we're working on. So, that really makes sense to be able to know that those are skills that students do need to have and sometimes parents might be aware of them or not, but certainly it's important to look at that. Melissa, what are you seeing?

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

I am also seeing a lot of the same things that both Katie and Kim have spoken about. But one of the things that I do see and I see quite regularly is parents not understanding the role that they take in helping their own child with his or her speech and language and communication disorder, how they can help at home. It's not just coming to the session one, two, three times a week. It's the whole picture.

<Mary Miele:

That makes sense because parents are really also educators and they get to really be involved in the developmental piece. That's very valuable. Okay, so Katie, let's come back to you. So, thank you for answering our first question. The next question we have is what are some signs that parents and teachers should be looking out for that may indicate that a child is experiencing speech or language difficulties?

Katie Stricker:

Yeah, so I think the most obvious signs are children that have overt speech sound challenges because this can present just in daily conversation, unclear speech, like difficulty understanding your child, sound substitution, so just you're hearing your child speak and you're like, well, what is that? What are they trying to say? That's a bit more obvious. Or once kids get into school age, difficulty producing words clearly when they're trying to read aloud, or even challenges with learning how to read early rhyming, phonological awareness skills. These errors I find are usually flagged by parents in schools by the time a child is in grade school because they're more obvious. Although the earlier the intervention happens, the better.

Oftentimes kids are referred to me for language challenges that are less obvious. So, for example, difficulty with using language in the classroom like storytelling as I mentioned before, using vague vocabulary like referring to objects as a thing or as stuff rather than using specific vocabulary. And then also the comprehension challenges, so difficulty following along with the routines of the classroom, following teacher directions, participating in classroom discussions or conversations. These challenges can all be indicative of a language weakness and should definitely be further looked into. It just really depends on how obvious they are and if teachers or parents or even pediatricians are flagging them.

<Mary Miele:

That makes really good sense. So, it's also a matter of understanding the way in which someone is articulating the language, but then also there's a piece of understanding. And then of course as students progress, I'm hearing you say that we need to also look at how the child is learning and using language to learn. So, are they able to maybe sequence a story, or really understand what their friends are asking them to play or do? And so there's a lot more complication maybe as a child is getting older that may need to be examined.

Okay. So, thank you. So let's go to the next question, please. How do you approach the initial assessment of a child's speech and language skills, and what factors do you consider during this process? So, I know many families maybe are referred from their school to you, but maybe there's a family who's listening now and they're thinking, "Well, maybe I should actually initiate an assessment." I imagine you get both, right? You have people coming to you from a referral process, but also parents might say, "Hey, I think something's wrong here," or, "I think something is needing to be looked at." And what would that assessment be like for families who are coming into that process?

Katie Stricker:

Yeah, so, in my practice, and I think a lot of practices in the area do this, I always offer a complimentary consult with parents, like a phone call or a Zoom call, whatever parents prefer, just to really ask about what concerns the parent has. You're right that some kids do come in with a very clear concern or question like, "My child can't say their Rs. We were referred. Can you evaluate and can you help us?" But oftentimes parents come and they say, "Oh, you know what? I'm not really sure. My child, their speech is hard to understand, or they're having trouble in the classroom or they're not reading, but we don't really know if they're behind." So, it's a bit more vague.

And so usually how I approach an assessment is I talk to the parents. I ask really specific questions based on what they're telling me. I might, depending on the age, ask if they do want to move forward, if I can speak to their teachers or any other providers that they are working with. Some families come and they've already had a neuropsychological evaluation, so that's really helpful because they come with so much information. So I usually just start by asking them questions. What are their concerns? What are they observing? How is their child communicating? Have they had any type of evaluation before, either like a screening at a school or through another provider?

And then from there, I prepare the assessment based on what they've told me, but always go in with a flexible mindset because sometimes you think you're doing an articulation assessment, you bring all your tools, and then it turns out as you're working with a child, you find, oh wait, they really might need a language assessment or vice versa. So, usually I bring a few tools, as many as I can carry. And then if you need to schedule a follow-up session, you just do that and you tell the family upfront that, "This is what I think it's going to look like, but it could change as I get to know and work with your child." And in terms of the assessment, there are just such a variety of tools. There's standardized assessments that we use consistently in our field, but then there's a lot of really valuable informal tools that we can use for assessment as well.

<Mary Miele:

Amazing. I was just actually talking with our head of assessment here at Evolved and we were talking about the blending of formative and summative assessments and how important that is. And actually we taped the podcast for January if you're interested in going back and listening to it. But really it sounds like you're also talking about very flexible assessments and you are as a practitioner able to understand the student's overall speech and language needs and adapt that assessment as you're giving the assessment to make sure you're getting the most accurate picture of the students' abilities. Am I understanding that correctly?

Katie Stricker:

Exactly. I think every speech therapist knows that flexibility goes a long way, especially when you're meeting a new child. And parents don't always know because they're not experts in child development, what exactly they're looking for. So, sometimes you have a call, you think you're going in for one assessment, and then after five 10 minutes you realize, "Oh wait, I need to pivot and actually focus on a different area of speech and language." And that's okay. A lot of these areas do go hand in hand, so sometimes you just have to figure it out as you go when you're working with the child for the first time.

<Mary Miele:

That makes really good sense to me. So, any of our other panelists, do you have anything to add, I guess in terms of signs that parents and teachers can look out for or anything regarding the initial assessment? I'll open it up before we move on to Kim's questions.

Kim Kramer:

I can add. One of the things that I'm noticing, especially in the preschool classrooms are those kids that say, "What? What? What did you say?" when the teacher gives an instruction. And that could be a whole host of things, but it is definitely something that needs to be looked at. So, I usually tell teachers that if they have any concerns, they should refer the parents back to the pediatrician and who would refer hopefully to an ENT for a hearing test to make sure that there's not something going on in the ears, especially during the winter months when we know these kids sometimes have fluid but aren't actually sick, and that is impeding their speech and language development.

<Mary Miele:

That's such a great tip. Thank you.

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

I could add on to that as well. Some of the things that I talked to some classroom teachers about is not just sometimes I hear things like, "I'm not sure if the kid's paying attention." That's what I hear a lot of when I talk to, especially in the preschool ages as well, but where I ask them to check for some understanding, to check back with the child if they can, to say, "What was it that I just asked? But what did I just say to the class?" to see if it really is ability of them not paying attention or not being able to understand the directions that were given.

<Mary Miele:

Sure, makes sense, or even sometimes being able to articulate it back in terms of that expressive language. It's always about being curious. I think that's such a good takeaway from this part of the conversation for any parent is just to be curious. And if you are noticing something, I always throw notes in my notes section of my phone regarding my kids. So, if there's something a teacher tells me that's interesting, I'll write it down and I'll say, "Oh, watch this," or, "Take a look at this. Is this a pattern? Is this something that keeps happening?" And so that's a really good way we could take this information forward.

So, Kim Kramer and I have had the pleasure of working together this past year as we've been implementing the Excel program into a school here in New York City called Birch Wathen Lenox. And I've learned that not only is she a really fabulous speech and language pathologist, but she also has a lot of this classroom experience, and then of course implementing this program into the school, so there's a lot of integration that you also do. Can you introduce yourself to us and then we'll get into some of the questions that I have prepared for you, Kim?

Kim Kramer:

Sure. Thank you for having me today. You're welcome. My name is Kim Kramer. I currently have an office on the Upper East side of Manhattan where I am a speech language pathologist, learning specialist, and certified Orton-Gillingham dyslexia specialist. So, I wear a few hats. I also do a little bit of school consultation on the side, a little boutique company. And Mary and I are working together at the Excel program for Birch Wathen Lenox.

<Mary Miele:

Yeah, thank you so much for being here. So, I've prepared a couple of really good questions for you. I'm excited to get to that. So, first off, could you share some strategies or activities that parents and educators can use to support speech and language development at home and in the classroom?

Kim Kramer:

That's a great question, Mary. Thank you. The number one thing I always tell parents when they come into my office or when they call is read to your child. Read every single day. Read all day long. If you have a sibling in the house and they want to read, that's great too. Have the babysitter read. And you don't actually have to read all the words in the book. You can shorten it if you have a smaller younger kid, and you can do pointing to different things in the book as well and you can change it around. And then you can ask questions, which not only works on the phonological awareness piece of reading and the listening comprehension piece, but it also works on the vocabulary, receptive language, expressive language, and it really teaches the kids a lot of things. So, I tell everybody, parents and teachers always, always read to your kids.

One of the other things I say is get them out of the house. These kids need to go to the park. I don't care if it's winter. Go to the park. Go to the museum. Get them out of the house. You don't have to spend a lot of money. You can take them somewhere that doesn't cost anything and expose them to different things. And one of the things that's really important is not just walking around with the child in the stroller, not talking to them, but talk to them. Talk to them all day long. Show them what you're doing. Talk to them about experiences. Use adjectives. Ask some questions, but don't be a questioner. Don't be an examiner asking a million questions to your child, but giving them language. So, those to me are two of the most important things that you can do for a young child.

<Mary Miele:

And I loved how you are so practical, too, in just saying it doesn't have to necessarily be you as the parent. It could also be the babysitter or the older child and et cetera. And just building that language, the fund of language is really, really helpful. And helping your child to do that experientially is really, really helpful. So, in terms of techniques, are there any specific techniques or tools that have proven to be particularly effective in your experience?

Kim Kramer:

Sure. So, we're in New York, the four of us recording this podcast, and New Yorkers notoriously speak quickly. So, I always tell parents and teachers and caregivers to slow down because when you speak really, really quickly, sometimes the child is listening to the first word of what you're saying, but you're already on the last word of your sentence and they've missed some of your information. It's just too fast. The other thing I say is gain the child's attention before you speak to them. So, if it's a small child, squat down. Get to their level. Get to their eye level so you can look right in their eyes. Make sure they're looking at you and then speak to them.

One of the other great strategies that I use is choice making. When you have a child that's just learning how to speak and they're getting frustrated because they don't have the vocabulary, you can hold up two items, one on the either side of your mouth. And if it's mealtime, you can say, "Do you want the apple or the banana?" And then if you have to repeat your question, use the same language. Don't change it around because the child's still processing the first question. So, if you say, "Do you want the apple or the banana? The apple's so yummy. It's red and crunchy. And the banana is great. You can peel it." The child has no idea what you're talking about. They're still trying to figure out what am I eating? I'm hungry. So, that's one of the other things that I work on with the parents and the caregivers.

For the classroom teachers, like Melissa said earlier in the podcast, I do teacher check-ins. May have the teacher can go over to the student and check in and say, "What are you going to do? What did I just say?" Make sure they're understanding what's going on in the classroom. And then the last thing is teach vocabulary. A lot of these teachers, they're fabulous teachers. They're doing amazing lessons. But sometimes they don't always teach all the vocabulary in a story perhaps. And then as they're reading the story, sometimes the students get a little bit confused because they just don't have that background knowledge.

<Mary Miele:

Those are really good, good tips. I really hadn't thought about many of them, but certainly two that resonated. One was the vocabulary just that we overlook I think what students know and don't know as adults we know, so it's hard to sort of have that empathy of what our students don't know. And even just simplifying our language is another one that does also require empathy, but certainly also a skill. Because I can sort of put myself back into the parenting of my young children, and I know for sure that I was over articulating a lot of things that I was saying because I can be very verbose.

So, it's also about understanding your child, but partnering with a speech and language pathologist to me is also an invitation and an opportunity to learn some of these techniques that will help you to connect better with your child when you have them. So, I thank you for that one. That's really helpful. So, let's get into some of that feeling of overwhelm and unsure about what to do, which comes about in many moments of parenting. So, what advice would you give to parents who may be feeling overwhelmed or unsure about how to help their child with the speech and language difficulties?
Kim Kramer:

It's a great question, Mary. Thank you. I'm a parent myself. My son is 18 years old, heading off to college hopefully next year. So, I've definitely been down this road. And the number one thing I will always remember my mom telling me is, "Stop and take a breath." Because in the moment, parents and myself included, get very overwhelmed and we react. So, I always tell everyone, "Stop for a second and just take a breath." And then after that, it depends where the overwhelming feelings are coming from. Is it the school telling you that your child needs services? Is it your mother-in-law saying, "Why isn't your child talking?" Is it the pediatrician? Is it your husband? Or is it just your mommy gut? Because we all have that mommy gut.

So, at the end of the day, I always say start with your pediatrician. They are always your first line of defense, first speech and language. And for everything else, they have lists and lists of referrals of trusted practitioners that they have used over the years. And go ahead and trust them. They may refer you to an ENT for a hearing test. They may refer you to a speech language pathologist. They may say that they don't need any of that. But if your mommy gut is still there, you know there's something going on, reach out and get help by a trusted professional, whether it's your pediatrician, speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist. You can always ask your mommy network too. Somebody else has always used a therapist in some capacity.

<Mary Miele:

For sure. And that's really important, I think it's just my experience both as a mom and an educator, is that certainly you may be in a position where a teacher or some kind of professional alerts you to an issue that your child is having. Hopefully you are in that position. Sometimes you're not. And so if your mom gut, as you said, is saying to you, "Hey, I think we should take a look at this," or if you're a parent or an educator and you are thinking that, the sooner you can get this information the better, because it is so important to have therapy if you need it, so that your brain can develop and go forward with an increased ability for speech and language development. So, I thank you so much for those tips. They're very, very actionable. So, I hope everyone listening already has gotten so much amazing information.

So, now we're going to go on to Melissa Wexler Gurfein, who I have also known for a good amount of time. In fact, Melissa worked with my daughter who has speech and language issues and selective mutism. And we've really worked on a great deal with her together. And I've learned so much from you, Melissa, over the years about speech and language, and I appreciate all of that. So, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself to everyone, and then we'll get into a couple of questions I've prepared for you.

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

Thank you, Mary, and thank you for having me on this podcast. As Mary said, my name is Melissa Wexler Gurfein. I'm also a private practitioner working on the Upper East side of Manhattan. My background

includes working in a school for the blind, visually impaired for nine years as a head speech pathologist, as well as being an adjunct instructor, clinical supervisor at New York University in their Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. That's pretty much my background in a nutshell.

<Mary Miele:

Amazing, thank you. Okay, so, why don't we talk a little bit about some of the questions we have here. So, first question is, how can speech and language therapists collaborate effectively with teachers and other professionals in a school setting to provide comprehensive support for children?

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

I cannot stress how important this is. Collaboration is the key to everything. So, whether the child is receiving services for speech sound disorder or a language learning difference, it's very important for the speech language pathologist to be in contact with the teacher and any other service provider or specialist who's working with that child. I personally find that team meetings are the most effective, where everyone who is supporting that child meets together as well as if the parents can be included is really the best way to go to provide that. Communication is effective among the team members as well as supports being provided across the board. Because even as myself, as the speech language pathologist, if a child's having difficulty in math, it's good to hear from the teacher who's instructing that child in math so that I can follow up within my own sessions. Because you may not think that they're related, but there's a lot of math language that sometimes isn't translated into a child who's struggling with communication.

<Mary Miele:

That makes really good sense. And I think team meetings are great, too, because it really provides that avenue for communication and partnership and it sets the tone for what this is all about. At Evolve, we've been working on putting in something called integration plans into our consultancy where every parent at least gets to know what they are. Whether they can do them or not is another thing. But what they are is really how do you talk with each other, as in how does your speech and language pathologist and your CIT and your OT and your PT and all of the people who are involved with your child, how do they talk with each other? What is that methodology like? And there are many different ways to do it, but certainly setting up a team meeting I think is very beneficial. And in that way, everyone gets to do it all at the same time. So, next question is, are there any recent advancements or research findings in the field of speech and language therapy that have had a significant impact on your practice?

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

There are constant research going on in the field of speech and in language. It's just continuous and it's hard to keep up with everything. And I think that it's specific to what types of disorders and learning differences that I as a speech therapist I'm seeing. So, the research that I've really been on top of has been coming out in the area of speech sound disorders and treatment of speech sound disorders. It has been a shift in thinking over the past several years on how to treat specific speech sound disorders, whether it's treating something as I'm going to say mild as mild articulation disorder with maybe an R and S to something that's phonological based for childhood or proxy of speech. And I think that that's something that for those who have children who are exhibiting that worth following, because the treatment that's coming out now has been really solid in what they're finding

<Mary Miele:

Interesting. And so really, I guess that leads you into an important piece here, which is if you're a parent and you're looking for someone to work with your child, just asking questions about how updated they are in terms of knowing research is important because there has been changes that have been happening and they're really important to know about. Can you share a success story or a memorable experience from your career that highlights the positive outcomes of speech and language therapy for school aged children?

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

So happy that I got this question. I could tell you so many of them, so it was really hard for me to narrow down one. So, I'm going to kind of put it into a general pullout there. My favorite experiences in general with the school age population is when a child gets all of a sudden for the first time, they either said the sound that I'm working on correctly, or the word that I'm working on correctly, or was able to express themselves in a way that I understood them. And the smile on that child's face for the success that individual child is feeling is incredible.

Moving past that school age into where I've been doing this a really long time, so I have children, they're not children anymore. They're young adults out there in this world. And seeing a child who I might've seen in first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade get into the college that they wanted to, or the vocational program that they wanted to, have a family, be a parent themselves, be able to be an active participant in the community that they put themselves in, is probably the best reward that I've seen the best success stories. And I have so many of them that I could share.

<Mary Miele:

Yes, I know. Well, I also, my daughter is one of them.

Melissa Wexler Gurfein:

Yes, she is.

<Mary Miele:

So, I can definitely say that for sure, for sure. Well, I really want to thank all of our panelists today for sharing your expertise. We've learned so much from you. And I do want to just, I guess, punctuate this by saying, listen, if you are a parent, if you are an educator, and you are thinking about a child who you care for and they seem to have some challenges within speech and language, I do hope that you come to this podcast. I will be putting all of our experts contact information there. You can contact them directly and ask questions. It's really important to take action. This is what this is all about. If you are not sure, ask. If you have a referral and you need to look into something, do it. It is so important to get this type of therapy and to be consistently partnering with the experts who can help your child to develop their speech and language skills. So, let's have more of those success stories, hopefully. And I do appreciate everyone coming today. Thank you, Katie. Thank you, Kim. Thank you, Melissa, so much.

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