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What is Language? What is Speech?

Individuals referring to their children as having a “speech problem” or seeing a “speech pathologist” often use the terms ‘speech’ and ‘language’ interchangeably. However, these two terms are indeed very different. Documented by the American Speech Hearing Association, language is defined as a system of socially shared rules that include the following:

1. What words mean (e.g., "star" can refer to a bright object in the night sky or a celebrity).
2. How to make new words (e.g. friend, friendly, unfriendly).
3. How to put words together (e.g., "Peg walked to the new store" rather than "Peg walk store new")
4. What word combinations are best in what situation ("Would you mind moving your foot?" could quickly change to "Get off my foot, please!" if the first request did not produce results).

Conversely, speech is the verbal means of communicating and consists of the following:

1. Articulation – How speech sounds are physically made (with lips, tongue, teeth, etc).
2. Voice – The use of the vocal folds and breathing to produce sound.
3. Fluency – The rhythm of speech (e.g., hesitations or stuttering can affect fluency).

* When a person has trouble understanding others (receptive language) or sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings completely (expressive language), then he or she may have a language disorder.

**When a person is unable to produce speech sounds correctly or fluently and/or has problems with his/her voice, then he or she may have a speech disorder.