

# Speech-Language Pathologist

## Job Description:

Speech-language pathologists work with people who have problems associated with speaking and swallowing. The many oral communication problems treated by these professionals include the inability to make speech sounds, stuttering, difficulty speaking clearly, and inappropriate voice quality. Some people have difficulty understanding spoken language, while others have problems with memory or attention that prevent them from properly processing language. These communication disorders may be the result of a stroke, accident, or may be present at birth. Speech-language pathologists also work with clients who have oral motor disorders that make eating and swallowing difficult.

Language problems have many causes and may be temporary or permanent. Speech-language pathologists use a variety of methods to assess the needs of their clients, including special instruments and written and oral tests. Using this information, they develop an individualized plan of treatment that may include teaching the client to make sounds, having him or her perform oral exercises, or using special devices to amplify speech. The speech-pathologist may be part of a medical team treating a patient for a number of related problems. They are, however, autonomous professionals, which means that they do not work under the direct supervision of a medical professional.

Speech-language pathologists work with people of all ages and in a variety of settings, including schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, clinics, and government agencies. Some set up their own practice and work with individual clients and/or contract their services to other facilities. Those who earn doctorates may choose to teach in universities or conduct research to find better ways to diagnose and treat speech and language disorders.

## Duties and Responsibilities:

- Diagnose communication and swallowing disorders by performing special tests, observing, and reviewing medical records.
- Develop individualized treatment plans.
- Teach clients to produce speech sounds.
- Assist clients to relearn language and regain the ability to speak after a stroke, illness, or other condition.
- Help clients reduce stuttering.
- Provide assistive equipment, such as "talking computers," and teach clients to use the equipment.
- Develop ways to help clients increase their cognitive processing and proper use of language (e.g., understand and follow instructions; answer questions).
- Counsel clients on coping with their communication disorder.
- Work with other education professionals to develop and implement individual learning plans for children.
- Teach appropriate ways to communicate in different kinds of settings.
- Teach ways to prevent speech and language disorders.
- Track a client's progress with written records.

## Personal Qualities:

People who suffer communication disorders may be frustrated and suffer emotional distress. Stroke victims who find themselves unable to speak may experience both fear and frustration on finding themselves unable to communicate with the people around them. Speech-language pathologists must be genuinely interested in helping others, compassionate, persistent, and patient. They must have excellent communication skills, including good listening skills, and be willing to work as part of a team. They must

also be able to focus and concentrate, and apply creativity and imagination in developing individualized treatment plans for a wide variety of clients.

### **Physical Requirements:**

Speech pathology is not physically demanding, although professionals may be required to walk around a school to work in different classrooms or to travel from one school or health care facility to another.

### **Educational Requirements:**

A master's degree in speech-language pathology is required for this profession. Undergraduate degrees should be in a related field and recommended subjects include biology, anatomy, physiology, psychology, human development, linguistics, semantics, and phonetics. Typical courses in master's degree programs include anatomy, physiology, development of normal speech, language and hearing, the nature of communication disorders, psychological aspects of communications, and evaluation and treatment methods. Students should check the specific prerequisites of the master's programs they plan to apply to. Continuing education is required by most states for licensure renewal.

### **Certification Requirements:**

Most states require that speech-language pathologists be licensed. The requirements are often similar or identical to those needed to obtain the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology (CCC-SLP) from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. These include a master's degree, 375 hours of supervised clinical experience, a 36-week postgraduate clinical fellowship, and a passing score on a national examination. In some states, speech-language pathologists who work in schools do not need the CCC-SLP, but must have a master's degree and a teaching credential.

### **Projected Outlook for this Career:**

Employment positions for speech-language pathologists are expected to grow much faster than average for all professions. Several factors influence this growth. Among them are the increasing number of children who, because of medical advances, are saved at birth, but suffer from communication disorders; legislation requiring that schools provide services for children with disabilities; and the growing population of aging Americans who suffer strokes and diseases that affect speech. A negative influence on career opportunities is federal legislation that limits the amount that Medicare reimburses for various types of therapy services.

### **Salary Information:**

In 2002, the median annual income for speech-language pathologists was \$49,450, with the middle 50% earning between \$39,930 and \$60,190 a year.

### **Career Ladders:**

Speech-language pathologists can be promoted to supervisory positions or become directors of departments or facilities. Some go into private practice and work with individual clients as well as contract their services to various facilities. Others earn a PhD and seek positions teaching in universities or conducting research to develop better ways to diagnose and treat communication and oral motor disorders.

### **To Learn More and Prepare:**

- Obtain information from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.
- Explore the Web Links provided in this profile.
- Review professional journals such as the American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and The Quarterly Journal of Speech.
- Conduct an informational interview or job shadow a speech-language pathologist.

- Obtain employment or a volunteer position in a school or organization that assists clients with speech problems.
- Keep a journal of your work and/or volunteer experiences.
- Investigate scholarship and grant programs designed for students interested in speech-language pathology.
- In high school, take classes in biology, communication, social studies, and English.
- Contact education programs for information about their admission requirements and course prerequisites.
- Learn more about the licensing requirements of state(s) in which you might want to work.

### **Professional Organizations:**

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
 10801 Rockville Pike  
 Rockville, MD 20852  
 (800) 638-8255  
<http://www.professional.asha.org>

### **Web Links:**

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
 Contains lots of useful information about speech-language pathology as a career, colleges and universities offering master's level programs, and fact sheets about the growing need for speech-language pathologists.  
<http://www.professional.asha.org>

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders  
 Click on "Voice, Speech, and Language."  
<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov>

MedlinePlus - U.S. National Library of Medicine  
 Click on "Health Topics, "S," and "Speech & Communication Disorders."  
<http://www.medlineplus.gov>