

Fact Sheet: Speech-Language Pathology

Nature of the Work

Speech-language pathologists are professionals concerned with evaluation, treatment, prevention and research in human communication and its disorders. They treat speech and language disorders and work with individuals of all ages, from infants to the elderly. They diagnose and evaluate speech problems, such as fluency (e.g., stuttering), articulation, voice disorders, or language problems, such as aphasia and delayed language and related disorders, such as dysphagia (e.g., swallowing difficulties). They design and carry out comprehensive treatment plans to achieve the following:

- Help individuals learn correct production of speech sounds
- Assist with developing proper control of the vocal and respiratory systems or correct voice production
- Assist children and adolescents with language problems, such as understanding and giving directions, answering and asking questions, understanding and using English grammar, using appropriate social language and conveying ideas to others
- Assist individuals who stutter to increase the amount of fluent speech and to cope with their disorder
- Assist individuals who have had strokes or suffered other brain trauma relearn language and speech skills
- Help individuals to use augmentative and assistive systems of communication
- Counsel individuals with speech and language disorders and their families or care givers to understand their disorder and to communicate more effectively in educational, social, and vocational settings
- Advise individuals and the community on how to prevent speech and language disorders

Although speech and language professionals work closely with teachers, physicians, psychologists, social workers, and rehabilitation counselors, and other members of an interdisciplinary team, they are autonomous and do not work under direct medical supervision.

In addition to clinical applications focusing on the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of communication disorders, speech-language pathologists have almost an infinite variety of ways to use their skills: train future professionals in colleges and universities; administer or manage agencies, clinics, organizations, or private practices; engage in academic, laboratory or medically related research to enhance knowledge about human communication processes; develop new methods and equipment to test and evaluate problems; establish more effective treatment programs; and investigate behavioral patterns associated with communication problems.

Work Sites

The practice and work of speech-language pathologists may take place in various settings:

- Public and private schools
- Hospitals
- Rehabilitation centers
- Nursing care facilities
- Community clinics
- Colleges and universities
- Private practice offices
- State and local health departments
- State and federal government agencies
- Home health agencies (home care)
- Long-term care facilities
- Adult day care centers
- Centers for persons with developmental disabilities
- Research laboratories

Entry Requirements

To enter this career, one must have a sincere interest in helping people, an above average intellectual aptitude, and the sensitivity, personal warmth, and perspective to be able to interact with the person who has a communication problem. Scientific aptitude, patience, emotional stability, tolerance, and persistence are necessary, as well as resourcefulness and imagination. Other essential traits include a commitment to work cooperatively with others and the ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing.

During high school, prospective speech-language pathologists should consider a program with courses in biology, physics, social sciences, English and mathematics, as well as in public speaking, language and psychology. On the undergraduate level, a strong liberal arts focus is recommended, with course work in linguistics, phonetics, anatomy, psychology, human development, biology, physiology and semantics. A program of study in communication sciences and disorders is available at the undergraduate level. The work of a speech-language pathologists is further enhanced by graduate education, which is mandated by ASHA. Speech-language pathologists and audiologists are also required by ASHA to obtain the ASHA Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC) which involves the completion of a master's degree, a supervised Clinical Fellowship (CF), and a passing score on a national examination. In some areas, such as college teaching, research, and private practice, a Ph.D. degree is desirable. In most states, speech-language pathologists and audiologists also must comply with state regulatory (licensure) standards to practice and/or have state education certification. The requirements are very similar or identical to ASHA's CCC requirements.

Earnings

Salaries of speech-language pathologists depend on their educational background, specialty and experience, along with the geographical location and type of setting in which they work. The median salary for ASHA-certified speech-language pathologists in 1997 was \$44,000. Persons in supervisory positions for example in administration and management, may earn well over \$53,000 per year. While the 1997 median salary for certified speech-language pathologists with 1-3 years experience was \$38,000, the median salary for certified speech-language pathologists with doctorate degrees was \$53,250. Good benefits packages, such as insurance programs and leave, are usually available to these professionals.

Working Conditions

Because there is such a wide variety of employment settings, working conditions also vary. Facilities in most school systems and established clinics are comfortable and adequately equipped, as are most facilities for research, colleges, and private practice. Since speech and hearing services are a vital part of total health care and the educational system, the number of work sites is constantly expanding. Because of the increasing demand for these services, work schedules may be heavy. An additional challenge is the constant need to update knowledge through educational experiences and reading periodicals. These challenges are balanced by the satisfaction of contributing to the quality of life of adults and children through facilitating the vital need of persons to communicate effectively.

Size of the Profession

The American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) represents 96,636 professionals. There are more than 79,000 ASHA-certified speech language pathologists. Also, there are approximately 1,400 persons who hold dual ASHA certification. That is, they are certified as both audiologists and speech-language pathologists. These individuals hold many major positions in clinical, academic, and research fields. There are an estimated 42,000 additional individuals who are providing services in the profession.

Future Outlook

The future of the speech-language pathology profession appears excellent. More frequent recognition of problems in preschool and school age children by teachers and parents, combined with the increased numbers of older citizens, and medical advances has created a growing need for speech and language services. There are shortages of qualified personnel in some areas of the country, especially in the inner city, rural and less populated areas. Job opportunities in medically related areas are expected to grow at an above average rate. Although competition for positions in some areas is keen, the potential for private practice and contract work is increasing rapidly.