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Speech & Language Specialist

Module 37: Overview of the Speech and Language Profession

This first module in the speech and language therapist course will focus on the ins and outs of the profession. Beginning with the job position itself, you will explore the types of training and education needed to obtain certification as a Speech and Language Therapist. We will discuss the various opportunities in the work force as well as the types of clients you will encounter once becoming a speech therapist or assistant speech therapist. From skillsets, responsibilities and necessary knowledge needed to perform the job, you'll complete this introductory module with a greater understanding of what working as a speech and language therapist is like in every day position, from working with clients and their families, furthering your credentials, and making certain to adhere to the best practices that the profession has to offer.

What you'll learn in this module:

- 37.1 Job description
- 37.2 Education and training
- 37.3 Work environments
- 37.4 Responsibilities of the speech and language therapist
- 37.5 Clients in need of speech and language services\
- 37.6 Moral and ethical guidelines

37.1 Job description

Speech and Language Therapists, also commonly referred to as Speech and Language Pathologists (or SLP), are individuals working in the communication sciences and disorders field. These therapists work to **provide regular rehabilitation and therapeutic services** to individuals diagnosed with communication disorders.



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37.1.1 What are communication disorders?

A communication disorder is when an individual has difficulty with the processing of speech, language, and/or auditory signals. Communication disorders can be the result of:

- hearing loss
- neurological impairment
- brain injury
- mental retardation
- drug usage
- physical impairments (i.e. cleft palate)
- emotional or psychiatric disorders
- developmental disorders

Scientific research estimates that 1 in every 10 Americans have at some point suffered from or will experience a communication disorder in their lifetime. Communication disorders, as discussed throughout this course of study, can be present at birth or be acquired for any number of reasons listed above. Furthermore, disorders in speech, language, and hearing can improve or worsen over time. The job of the speech and language therapist is to aid the individual suffering with a speech disorder in performing everyday tasks, finding alternative methods of communication, and adopting coping strategies to lead a normal, fulfilling life.

37.1.2 Speech Pathology vs. Audiology

Under the umbrella term of “communication disorders,” clinicians will usually pursue one specific career path to follow, be it in speech and language or in audiology.

- **Speech and Language Pathology** – a clinician who specializes in the evaluation and treatment of communication and swallowing disorders. The term “pathology” or “pathologist” is the scientific label for the someone who diagnoses diseases or disorders in a medical setting. The term is used interchangeably with the word “therapist” within this profession.
- **Audiologist** – a doctor who diagnoses, manages, and treats issues related to hearing, tinnitus, balance, and other auditory problems or disorders.

The world of a speech pathologist and an audiologist very often overlap and complement one another, as their patients both deal with communication disorders and difficulties. Both professions specialize in the study of the ear and the mouth, but speech therapists focus more



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on helping patients find ways to communicate more effectively while audiologists focus more on learning to communicate in entirely different ways (i.e. with the use of a hearing aid, for instance).

37.2 Education and training

Speech and Language Therapists fall within the spectrum of professionals in the healthcare field, thus requiring the adherence of education, training, certification, and accreditation guidelines. To work as a board **certified speech therapist, one must receive a master's degree from an accredited university**. In the United States, accreditation is the result of a thorough and comprehensive degree program as outlined by the standards set by ASHA (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association). The professional career of speech and language therapists require continued certifications, attendance at various seminars to receive continued education in advancements in the field, and continuous research and awareness of issues and topics related to their job.

Furthermore, clinical practicum and passing scores on states (outlined specifically by states in the U.S. or by country of residence) will often be required.

37.2.1 Degree programs

Individuals who have not received any bachelor's degree from a four-year university must obtain a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders in order to further their study of speech and language therapy. For those individuals who already hold degrees in any subject can find many "post-bachelor" programs that provide a condensed course of in-depth study in the field. For instance, post-bachelor programs will provide students with a "second bachelors degree" to their existing credentials, providing a 10-12 class course load in the areas of speech, language, and hearing specifically.

Once obtaining a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences, individuals are eligible to work as Speech-Language Assistants. In order to work as a lead speech pathologist, one must earn a master's degree in Speech and Language Pathology/Therapy.



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37.2.2 Clinical practicum and exams

In order to earn your credentials as a SLP, you must complete 400 clinical observation hours and receive a passing score on the National Board Exams. 25 hours of observation under a board certified speech and language therapist can be done in your undergraduate or post-bachelors studies. The remaining 375 hours are completed at the graduate level, where students work directly underneath a speech therapist and with direct interaction with clients in healthcare and educational settings. In addition to practicum hours, individuals should receive satisfactory passing scores on the following comprehensive exams:

- Knowledge and Skills Acquisition Exam, taken prior to receiving one's master's degree in Speech and Language Therapy
- National Speech-Language Pathology Board Exam, otherwise known at the state level as "Praxis."
- A year of Clinical Fellowship, in which 1260 hours are spent in a full-time work setting beneath a certified SLP.
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC), which is received following successful completion of one's Clinical Fellowship Year (CFY)

37.2.3 Maintaining certification

After all is said and done, speech and language therapists must continue to adapt to the modern research, trends, and awareness in communication disorders through continued education practices. To maintain one's licenses in speech and language services, obtaining Continued Education Units (CEU's) should be explored. There are many suggested ways for professionals to obtain these CEU's in order to maintain their clinical license for practice:

- attend seminars and workshops on topics in speech and language
- take continued education classes in speech and language disorders
- free online CEU courses and seminars
- paid online CEU courses and seminars
- web courses that offer information valuable to the field

37.3 Work environment

One of the benefits of working as a speech and language therapist is the ability to obtain clinical experience in various areas of the field during your graduate studies. From education



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to healthcare, there are ample opportunities available that will continue to grow within the outlook of the next 10-15 years. Even if a SLP chooses to take one path or direction in their career, there is always the potential to switch environments and work with different types of clients.

Here are the many places you can explore in the hunt for a work environment suited to and in need of speech and language therapists:

- elementary and secondary schools – a majority of speech and language therapists can be found in the school system, providing classes and training in communication and speech services for students in need. Whether it's students with speech impairments like stuttering or it's young adults with developmental disabilities that affect their communication such as autism or down syndrome, SLP in the schools work with a team of teachers and other professionals to set goals and challenges to enhance communication.
- hospitals – needed in this arena is a great understanding of medical terminology and the ability to work within a fast paced medical setting. Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals will be part of the team of individuals diagnosing, testing, and evaluating the progress of patients. SLP in this area work most commonly with swallowing disorders and speech and language problems related to strokes, traumatic brain injuries, respiratory issues, or other complications with health.
- nursing or rehabilitation homes – treatment is often offered in both group and individual settings and focus on daily coping skills and the continued evaluation of progress for patient's communication disorders. Struggles are often of a neurological nature, brain injury, stroke, or swallowing and most commonly address issues with deterioration of communication and cognitive abilities related to the aging process.
- private practices – many speech and language therapists opt to, once satisfactory experience is gained, branch out on their own and be their own boss in a private practice. Individuals who choose this path must have a clear identity to the types of services they provide and to what kind of patients, based on expertise. For instance, one might have a private practice that specializes in infants and early childhood development or in contrast might focus more on neurological concerns with senior citizens. It is not necessary to limit oneself, therefore, a SLP can offer general services to all clients, ensuring that he or she only takes on clients to whom he/she can most benefit based on the areas of strength held in the profession.
- traveling or abroad opportunities – communication needs, disorders, and disabilities are present around the entire world, making the role of a speech and language therapist highly desirable overseas, no matter where you are from. It is often a benefit



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to individuals who are multi-lingual and culturally aware. If you have an interest in travel, other cultures, and the ability to move around without having concrete roots in any one place at a time, then travelling to other countries or continents to help individuals in need of speech, language, hearing, and communication services can be explored.

37.4 The role of a speech and language therapist

A Speech and Language Therapist might perform any number of important roles in the life of a client suffering from communication disorders. Education and medical reform, legal mandates, and the ever evolving practices within the professional field of communication disorders helps to outline the roles and responsibilities of those who work as speech and language professionals.

Here are the major responsibilities one can find his or herself engaged in as a speech and language therapist:

- working with a range of ages – from newborns, toddlers, school age children, adolescents, adults, and older adults, SLPs will encounter clients of all ages.
- working with a range of disorders – be it with language, articulation, fluency, voice and resonance, swallowing, brain injuries, neurological conditions, or motor impairments, SLPs engage with clients from various developmental backgrounds and stages.
- working with a range of cultures and backgrounds – being what is referred to as “culturally competent” is essential to the role of a SLP. For instance, it is imperative that language barriers are not misdiagnosed as a disability or disorder in the ability for someone to communicate. Many people find themselves at a disadvantage in society for a number of reasons, such as socio-economic status, education level, cultural and linguistic differences, and a learning curve in acquiring English and its dialect as a second language. Understanding the diverse backgrounds of clients is necessary in treating communication disorders versus that of individuals whose communication struggles stem from something culturally based.
- working with a team of professionals – whether it’s your clients’ families, friends, teachers, doctors, or other therapist professionals (i.e. occupational, psychological, psychiatric, physical, etc.), working closely with other professionals in the healthcare field to provide the



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best possible services and follow the most satisfactory course of action for your client will need to be followed.

- perform a range of responsibilities and services to the client – each client will have an individualized plan of action with a particular goal-set based upon his or her diagnoses, abilities, and progress. It is the role of the SLP to provide preventative measures, assessment procedures, intervention strategies, goal and therapy program design, data collection and analysis, and maintain records of compliance with standards that go along with ASHA's guidelines to ensure the most reliable and satisfactory therapy is being delivered to clients.
- maintain a leadership role in the field – as a SLP, it is one's responsibility to carry out the role as an advocate for individuals in the communication disorders community. If clients are struggling in school or in the workplace, the SLP can work as a collaborator, facilitator, and advocate to ensuring discriminatory actions are not taking place and for the individual to receive modifications to suit his or her communication needs. Furthermore, in the world of leadership, it is expected that SLP work as mentors to new students and employees of the profession, much like your own clinical supervisors did for you during your studies. Supervision and mentorship is a constantly evolving scenario in the profession of speech and language professionals. From research and professional development in the field to interacting with and educating family and friends as to the needs of their loved ones, the SLP often is the liaison between the client and the people around the client who may not have a grasp or understanding to the struggles the individual endures.

37.5 Working with clients

A job as a speech and language therapist will put you in touch with people from all different walks of life who span different age groups and life experiences. **Some of the common client types a speech and language pathologist might encounter are:**

- infants with feeding and swallowing difficulties
- toddlers with delayed language development
- school age children (including adolescents) who experience language delays or disorders
- school age children with articulation and phonological disorders
- school age children with delays in development involving play skills
- children and adults with autism or other syndromes
- children and adults with processing disorders
- children and adults with language-based learning disorders
- people who stutter



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- people with voice disorders
- people who experience difficulty swallowing, drinking, or eating food
- people with hearing impairments

- people who have experienced a stroke
- people who have experienced a head injury of some kind
- people who have neurological disorders that affect speech, language, cognition, and/or swallowing
- people who wish to modify their accents
- people who wish to gain public speaking skills (can relate to corporate clients who often give presentations in public forums)

In addition to the clients themselves, speech and language therapists will work closely with the family or loved ones of their clients. For instance, elderly patients who have memory and speech loss due to a stroke will attend therapy sessions to learn coping strategies, engage in day-to-day planning, and other activities that lend them toward having the best possible quality of life during recovery or maintenance of their communication disorder. However, family and friends can often become impatient, have unrealistic expectations, and even unknowingly inhibit their loved one from making progress due to enabling or other behaviors that deter progress. Because of this, the people closest to your clients will also often need to attend training, workshops, or therapy sessions in order to become active and engaged members of the rehabilitation team.

As a speech and language therapist, it is your responsibility to research and understand the cultural and social backgrounds of your clients and their families as best you can.

While it is impossible to always know every single aspect of a persons' background, coming to client and family meetings equipped with a general understanding of the norms they are familiar with and comfortable with will help guide a SLP's therapy strategies, thus resulting in the best possible outcome for your clients.

37.6 Moral and ethical guidelines

All individuals who hold a Certificate of Clinical Competency (CCC) and are a member of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) must adhere to a very strict ethical code. However, even if you are a member of ASHA but do not yet hold a CCC, or in contrast if you hold a CCC but are not a current member of ASHA, these guidelines also pertain to you. **Furthermore, individuals with a bachelors or certification training in communication disorders can often become certified as SLP-A's, or Speech Language Pathologist Assistants.** These individuals, since they have direct contact with clients but are under the



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supervision of board certified therapists, also much follow the ASHA guidelines. Finally, individuals in their clinical year who are working in schools, healthcare facilities, or any setting where services are delivered to the communication needs of those with difficulties in speech and language will also be expected to be aware of, comply by, and hold steadfast in the practice of the moral and ethical guidelines of the speech, language, and hearing community.

37.6.1 Purpose of ASHA's Ethical Code

ASHA's Code of Ethics provides guidance to its members and the communication disorders community to all topics and issues related to the practice of speech, language, and hearing practices. It was originally drafted in 1925 as a general framework for standard professional practices, and became the **official "Code of Ethics" of the Association in 1952.** The document is revised, as needed, regularly and outlines:

- the work and practices that professionals in the industry value
- scientific and clinical expectations
- principles of duty
- accountability procedures
- fairness in the profession
- responsibilities of speech and language therapists

Overall, the code of ethics is, at its core, intended to ensure the welfare of individuals seeking services in communication disorders and to protect both the reputation and integrity of individuals who work in the field.

37.6.2 Principles of ethics:

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) outlines four areas of ethical responsibility.

Principles of Ethics I

Individuals shall honor their responsibility to hold paramount the welfare of persons they serve professionally or who are participants in research and scholarly activities, and they shall treat animals involved in research in a humane manner.

Some of the **rules highlighted under this first section of the ethical code are** (but not limited to):



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- never to discriminate in the delivery of professional services or in the conduct of research and scholarly activities on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity/gender expression, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin, disability, culture, language, or dialect.
- never to misrepresent the credentials of aides, assistants, technicians, support personnel, students, research interns, Clinical Fellows, or any others under their supervision, and they shall inform those they serve professionally of the name, role, and professional credentials of persons providing services.
- to make a reasonable statement of prognosis, but they shall not guarantee—directly or by implication—the results of any treatment or procedure.
- to protect the confidentiality and security of records of professional services provided, research and scholarly activities conducted, and products dispensed. Access to these records shall be allowed only when doing so is necessary to protect the welfare of the person or of the community, is legally authorized, or is otherwise required by law.
- to maintain timely records and accurately record and bill for services provided and products dispensed and shall not misrepresent services provided, products dispensed, or research and scholarly activities conducted.

Principles of Ethics II

Individuals shall honor their responsibility to achieve and maintain the highest level of professional competence and performance.

Some of the **rules highlighted under this second section of the ethical code are** (but not limited to):

- to engage in only those aspects of the professions that are within the scope of their professional practice and competence, considering their certification status, education, training, and experience.
- to enhance and refine their professional competence and expertise through engagement in lifelong learning applicable to their professional activities and skills.
- to comply with all institutional, state, and federal regulations that address any aspects of research, including those that involve human participants and animals.
- to make use of technology and instrumentation consistent with accepted professional guidelines in their areas of practice.



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Principles of Ethics III

Individuals shall honor their responsibility to the public when advocating for the unmet communication and swallowing needs of the public and shall provide accurate information involving any aspect of the professions.

Some of the **rules highlighted under this third section of the ethical code are** (but not limited to):

- never to misrepresent their credentials, competence, education, training, experience, and scholarly contributions.
- To avoid engaging in conflicts of interest whereby personal, financial, or other considerations have the potential to influence or compromise professional judgment and objectivity.
- never to misrepresent research and scholarly activities, diagnostic information, services provided, results of services provided, products dispensed, or the effects of products dispensed.
- never to defraud through intent, ignorance, or negligence or engage in any scheme to defraud in connection with obtaining payment, reimbursement, or grants and contracts for services provided, research conducted, or products dispensed.
- to provide accurate and complete information to the public about the nature and management of communication disorders, about the professions, about professional services, about products for sale, and about research and scholarly activities.
- to adhere to prevailing professional norms and shall not contain misrepresentations when advertising, announcing, and promoting their professional services and products and when reporting research results.
- never to knowingly make false financial or nonfinancial statements and shall complete all materials honestly and without omission.

Principles of Ethics IV

Individuals shall uphold the dignity and autonomy of the professions, maintain collaborative and harmonious interprofessional and intraprofessional relationships, and accept the professions' self-imposed standards.



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Some of the **rules highlighted under this fourth section of the ethical code are** (but not limited to):

- never to engage in any form of conduct that adversely reflects on the professions or on the individual's fitness to serve persons professionally.
- never to engage in dishonesty, negligence, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation.
- never to engage in any form of harassment, power abuse, or sexual harassment.
- never to knowingly allow anyone under their supervision to engage in any practice that violates the Code of Ethics.
- to always comply with local, state, and federal laws and regulations applicable to professional practice, research ethics, and the responsible conduct of research.

For the complete list of ASHA's Code of Ethics, please visit www.asha.org/policy/

By adhering to these very carefully outlined guidelines, individuals entering the SLP profession, as well as those who have been a part of this career path for many years, are able to have clearly defined expectations to their roles and responsibilities, on both a legal level and moral obligation level to their clients, their clients' families, their colleagues and collaborators, and the profession as a whole.

[EXAM LINK](#)