Prosody



The word 'prosody' means the 'melody and rhythm' of speech'.

Prosody is an important part how we speak. Here are some things it does in communication:

- ✓ It helps us to pronounce words the right way, e.g. '**di**gest', means 'a journal', but 'di**gest**' means 'to absorb food'.
- ✓ It shows what type of sentence someone is saying, e.g. 'comments' vs 'questions'. You can hear the difference between "it's Tuesday today." And "it's Tuesday today?". That's the prosody!
- ✓ It shows the boundaries of phrases and sentences, e.g. Consider how you would say these two sentences: "What's that on the road ahead?" vs "What's that on the road? A head!"
- ✓ It helps us show our emotions and mood, e.g. it helps us know if someone is angry or sad.
- ✓ Prosody also shows the reasons for communication, e.g. making a suggestion vs making a command.

Prosody is present through certain acoustic (sound) and timing features of speech. These include:

- the length or duration of the speech sounds
- the pitch of the sounds – high or low
- intonation - changing pitch across a sentence
- how loud the speech is
- the emphasis (stress) on syllables and words
- the length or duration of pauses

Children learn to use more complex prosody as they get older.

When you speak to someone with difficulties in prosody, you might think they sound robotic. You might notice their speech is very fast or slow. Or you might notice that the emotion in their voice does not match the situation. As an example of this, a child might sound bored when they really feel excited.

A speech pathologist will look for features like this during conversations with a person:

- Monotone – does the person's speech stay mostly on one pitch?
- Does the emotional expression always match the situation?
- Does the emphasis (stress) change much on words in sentences?
- Does the emphasis (stress) change much on syllables in long words?
- Are there unusual gaps between words?
- Are there unusual gaps between syllables?
- Are the vowels or consonants a bit too long?

These differences are unusual for a school-aged child. Difficulties with prosody might be a sign that there is something else going on. It's always worth asking a speech pathologist about a child's prosody if you notice it is different.

What can I do to help?

- ✓ If you aren't sure if you have interpreted somebody's emotions or intent correctly, ask them.
- ✓ Be aware that this might be a cultural difference, and not a disorder or a difficulty.
- ✓ Singing songs, learning rhymes and playing music are wonderful ways of developing awareness and control of melody and rhythm.
- ✓ Speech pathologists can support people to optimise their communication and interactions.

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