

Speech-Language Pathologist

Career Description

Speech-language pathologists are professionals who are educated in the study of human communication, its development, and its disorders. Speech-language pathologists work with people with reduced speech intelligibility; with speech rhythm and fluency problems, such as stuttering; with voice quality problems, such as inappropriate pitch or harsh voice; with problems understanding and producing language; with cognitive communication impairments, such as attention, memory, and problem-solving disorders; and with hearing loss who use hearing aids or cochlear implants, in order to develop auditory skills and improve communication. They also work with people who have swallowing difficulties and those who do not have communication disorders but who would like to improve their skills or modify an accent.

Speech and language difficulties can result from a variety of causes, including stroke, brain injury, or other neurologic conditions, developmental delays, autism, cerebral palsy, cleft palate, voice pathology, hearing impairment, or social/behavioral disorders. Speech-language pathologists use written and oral tests, as well as special instruments, to diagnose the nature and extent of impairment and to record and analyze speech, language, and swallowing irregularities. For individuals with little or no speech production, speech-language pathologists may select augmentative or alternative communication methods, including manual and electronic communication systems, and teach their use. They help patients develop, or recover, functional communication skills so patients can fulfill their educational, vocational, and social roles.

Speech-language pathologists often collaborate as a multidisciplinary team with other education and health care professionals, such as teachers, physicians, social workers, and psychologists. They counsel individuals and their families concerning communication disorders and how to cope with the stress and misunderstanding that often accompany them. They also work with family members to recognize and change behavior patterns that impede communication and treatment and to show them communication-enhancing techniques to use at home.

In most settings, a graduate degree is required to work as a speech-language pathologist. A doctoral degree (PhD) is preferred in some career paths, such as college teaching, and research.

Working with an understanding of the full range of human communication and its disorders, speech-language pathologists:

- Evaluate and diagnose speech, language, and swallowing disorders in individuals of all ages, from infants to the elderly
- Treat speech, language, and swallowing disorders

In addition, speech-language pathologists may:

- Prepare future professionals in colleges and universities
- Engage in research to enhance knowledge about human communication processes and investigate behavioral patterns associated with communication disorders

Employment Characteristics

Speech-language pathologists may work in a wide range of settings, including schools, universities, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, skilled nursing facilities, community clinics, geriatric facilities, home health care services, and public health departments, or in private practice.

Salary

Salaries of speech-language pathologists depend on educational background, specialty, and experience, along with the geographical location and type of setting in which they work. According to the ASHA 2010 Schools Survey Annual Salary Report, the median salary for ASHA-certified speech-language pathologists was \$58,000 for those employed on an academic year (i.e., 9- to 10-month) basis and \$65,000 for those on a calendar year (i.e., 11- to 12-month) basis. The 2010 median starting salary for certified speech-language pathologists in school settings with 1 to 3 years of experience in the professions was \$45,200 for an academic year appointment. The median calendar year salary for management positions was \$83,000.

According to the ASHA 2009 Health Care Survey Salary Report, the median salary for ASHA-certified speech-language pathologists was \$70,000. The 2009 median salary for certified speech-language pathologists in health care settings with four to six years' experience was \$60,000. The median calendar-year salary for management positions was \$85,000. Good benefits packages, such as insurance programs and leave, are usually available to speech-language pathologists.

Employment Outlook

The combination of growth in the occupation and an expected increase in retirements over the coming years should create excellent job opportunities for speech-language pathologists. Employment is expected to grow by 19 percent from 2008 to 2018, faster than the average for all occupations (www.bls.gov/oco/ocos099.htm). More frequent recognition of problems in preschool and school-age children by teachers and parents, combined with the increased number of older citizens and medical advances, have created a growing need for speech and language services. In addition, opportunities for employment in research and higher education are expected to increase as baby boomers currently in these positions retire. Clinical opportunities will be especially strong for those with bilingual and multicultural expertise. There are shortages of qualified personnel in some areas of the country, especially in inner city,

rural, and less populated areas. Job opportunities in medically related areas are expected to grow at an above-average rate. Many states now require that all newborns be screened for hearing loss and receive appropriate early intervention services. Greater awareness of the importance of early identification and diagnosis of speech, language, swallowing, and hearing disorders will also increase employment opportunities.

Educational Programs

Approximately 246 universities in the United States offer graduate education programs in speech-language pathology that prepare students for entry into independent professional practice. A master's degree is the entry-level degree required for practice. Clinical and research doctoral degree programs also are available as advanced degree programs for further study of speech-language pathology and speech or language science.

Length. Full-time study usually takes at least 2 years (including summers) to complete a master's degree program in speech-language pathology. Graduate education in speech-language pathology requires a combination of academic and clinical course work as well as clinical internships.

Prerequisites. Knowledge of the biological sciences, physical sciences, mathematics, and behavioral or social sciences are required for the ASHA Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology. Undergraduate programs in communication sciences and disorders will provide a background in the sciences, linguistics, phonetics, psychology, normal speech, and language development, and introductory course work in speech-language pathology. Students without an undergraduate degree in communication sciences and disorders may be required to complete prerequisite course work. Excellent oral and written communication skills are expected.

Curriculum. Graduate programs should offer a curriculum to allow a student to meet the knowledge and skills necessary to enter practice in speech-language pathology. A typical graduate program of study includes course-content in normal and abnormal communication development; diagnostic and treatment procedures, articulation, expressive and receptive language, voice disorders, fluency, swallowing, and ethics. Opportunities to work in a variety of clinical settings and with a diverse range of clients should be provided during the graduate program of study.

Licensure and Certification

In most states, speech-language pathologists must comply with state regulatory (licensure) standards and/or have state teacher certification to practice in specific educational settings. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia require speech-language pathologists to have a license to practice. Fifteen states currently require a license to practice in any work setting.

A graduate degree, completion of a 36-week full-time supervised clinical experience, and passage of a national examination are typically required to achieve the credentials. Individuals should contact the appropriate state licensure board or teacher certification agency for more information about requirements. ASHA's Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology (CCC-SLP), a nationally recognized credential, offers certificate holders ease in qualifying for state credentials. Although the CCC-SLP is not typically required for state licensure, the requirements leading to the CCC are generally required. Possession of the CCC-SLP may qualify individuals for certain employment opportunities, promotions, and salary supplements, and is often required for reimbursement of services provided by public and private insurance.

Inquiries

For information about a specific program, contact the director of the speech-language pathology program in care of the institution listed. Program information can be accessed on ASHA's web site at: www.asha.org/students/-academic/EdFind.

For additional information about the profession or academic program accreditation, contact:

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)
2200 Research Boulevard
Rockville, MD 20850
(800) 498-2071
www.asha.org

Note: Adapted in part from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Speech-Language Pathologists, at www.bls.gov/oco/ocos099.htm.