

Alexa the Speech Pathologist

About a year ago, my daughter had trouble pronouncing several words. Then we hired a full-time, live-in speech pathologist.

Her name is Alexa, and she lives in a small black cylinder on our kitchen island.

We tried helping our daughter with her speech to no avail for quite a while, but Alexa got fast results. She didn't do any mouth exercises or anything resembling speech practice. Instead, she played music. Any song you request, she can find and play.

My daughter loves to listen and dance, so she excitedly made requests of Alexa. But unless pronounced correctly, Alexa couldn't understand and the song wouldn't be played. Worse, she might play some other song nothing like the one requested.

My daughter was frustrated by her inability to get what she wanted, but rather than get embarrassed or resign herself to failure as she did when we'd try to help her with pronunciation, she just kept trying until she got it. She'd sometimes slow down, try forming the titles with different mouth movements, and in the process realize the key to tricky words.

Alexa's approach worked ten times better than ours. My daughter doesn't have perfect pronunciation, but it's much better than it was. And the shame of working on pronunciation for parental approval is gone. My daughter doesn't distinguish speech practice from play time.

The reason it worked so well coming from Alexa is that she had something my daughter wanted already, and not because we begged her to want it. She has music that can only be unlocked with the key of good pronunciation.

Even more important, Alexa's inability to comply with poorly formed words is not a deliberate trick to coax learning out of my daughter. Kids can sense that kind of artificial punishment/reward structure and internalize it in unhealthy ways, or just shut down. Alexa operates without emotion or expectation. It's just cause and effect. She simply cannot process commands she can't understand. She adds no patronizing, "Don't feel bad!", or, "So close!", or, "Good job!" to the successful or unsuccessful attempts.

She frees my daughter to go about her day chasing after her goals and transforms something desired by others into something she wants for herself, to solve a real-world problem that matters to her, not anyone else.

There's no better way to learn.