

Help for Stammering

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Information for Parents

Stammering in preschool children - how parents can help

Difficulties with speaking fluently between 2 - 4 years affects about one child in 20. While the underlying causes are not fully understood, we know that parents do NOT cause stammering - also called stuttering. Evidence shows that most children outgrow this phase over a few weeks or months, although at the time this can be hard to believe.

It can be a shock when your child starts to speak differently, "out of the blue". Sometimes your child may get quite stuck. This can be painful to see, and you may feel helpless and worried. Some periods may seem more difficult than others. The non-fluency may also come and go.

Our advice is to refer your child to a speech and language therapist (SLT) as soon as you can. You can usually do this directly without seeing a GP. BSA can provide you with local contact details. For the one in three or four children who need extra help, speech therapy has been shown to be more effective before the age of five. Although your child may not need regular therapy, the therapist can carry out a full assessment, offer advice, and help you to monitor your child's fluency.

In the meantime, take a look at the following guidelines. They cover areas of communication that can help young children to develop their fluency skills. See if there are any changes you could make to help support your child. It may also be helpful to show this leaflet to other family members and adults in your child's life such as nursery teachers or childminders.

The BSA good communication guide

When speaking to your child:

- **Slow down your rate of speech, but don't tell your child to slow down or take a deep breath.**
- **Let your child have special time when she leads the way with an activity of her choice.**
- **Ask one question at a time and give him plenty of time to answer.**
- **Use short, simple sentences.**
- **When listening to your child**
- **Keep eye-contact.**
- **Pay attention to what your child is saying, not how he says it.**
- **Pause before answering questions.**
- **Make sure everyone gets a turn to speak.**
- **Acknowledge speech difficulties with reassurance and encouragement - not with corrections or criticism.**

Other people:

- **Ask other adults in your child's life to follow this guidance.**

Helpful tips for parents

1. Show your child that you are interested in what he says, not how he says it. Try to maintain natural eye-contact when he is having difficulty talking. Don't finish his sentences - this can be frustrating for him.

2. Be supportive. Respond to a speech difficulty in the same way that you would with any other difficulties that arise as they develop their skills, such as when they trip over or spill things. If you feel it's appropriate, acknowledge the difficulty in a matter-of-fact way, so that she doesn't feel criticised. Avoid labelling the difficulty as stammering. You could use expressions like "bumpy speech" or "getting stuck", or ask her for her own words or descriptions.

3. If you speak quickly, slow down your own rate of speech when you talk to your child. Telling him to slow down, start again or to take a deep breath is unhelpful. Pausing for a second before you answer or ask a question can also help him to feel less rushed.

4. Be encouraging if your child gets upset about her speech, just as you would if she was upset about any other difficulty. You might say something like "Don't worry, talking can be tricky sometimes when you're still learning."

5. Observe your child's speaking patterns but try to resist seeing it as a 'problem?' Stammering is not caused by parents, but your anxiety can be passed on to your child, who may feel he is doing something wrong. In fact, he is just struggling a bit at the moment, and the stage may well pass.

6. Set aside a few minutes at a regular time each day when you can give your full attention to your child in a calm, relaxed atmosphere. You could follow her lead in playing or talking about something she likes. Try to talk about the things you are doing together right now, not about things that happened in the past or are planned for the future.

7. Reduce the number of questions you ask. Always give your child plenty of time to answer one question before asking another. This way, he is less likely to feel under pressure. Keep your sentences short and simple and instead of asking questions, simply comment on what your child has said, thereby letting him know you are listening.

8. Take turns to talk so that everyone in the family can speak without being interrupted. This will reduce the amount that your child is interrupted, or that she interrupts others.

9. Respond to your child's behaviour in the same way that you would with a child who does not stammer. As with any other child, discipline needs to be appropriate and consistent.

10. Try to avoid a hectic and rushed lifestyle. Stammering can increase when your child is tired. Children who stammer respond well to a routine and structured environment at home and at nursery or playgroup. It is also helpful to establish regular sleep patterns and a regular healthy diet.

Case study 1 - Give instructions one at a time

"I realised we were expecting too much of my bright and capable three year old daughter. We have all slowed down and now use language more appropriate for her age - in particular just giving her one instruction at a time.

Rather than: 'Please find your toy shopping trolley, put the shopping back in it and bring it back into the playroom,' I now break it down. Eg, 'Can you find your trolley? Good girl. Let's put the shopping back in it. Well done. Can you now take it back to the playroom?'
This seems to have really helped her."

Case study 2 - prepare a child for new situations

"Look for ways to reduce the pressure of new situations in a child's life. My son was going to the zoo with the school. I asked if he was happy about it and he said he was worried about what it was going to be like. We looked on the zoo website and I told his teacher and I ensured that he was happy before he went. All of this planning helps to reduce pressure which can obviously affect talking."

from <http://www.stammering.org/parents_help.html>