

Stuttering in Childhood



Stuttering is a childhood speech problem in which the smooth timing of words is interrupted.

Stuttering by your 2 to 5 year-old child is often a normal part of learning to talk. Most children, as much as 85% of those who begin to stutter, outgrow the problem spontaneously within the first year of onset or by the time they are young adults.

Here are some suggestions for helping your child to become more fluent . . .

Be aware of pressures in your child's life

Lower expectations

- Refrain from demanding a level of perfection that is higher than what your child is capable of (e.g. talking rapidly, precisely, or maturely at all times).
- Often your child himself may be perfectionistic and demanding of his own performance – give him the reassurance that everyone makes mistakes and that it is okay to do so.
- Limit the number of direct questions you ask your child. When questions are asked, ask one at a time and give the child ample time to answer. Ask only necessary questions and word them so that short, definite answers are possible.
- Avoid prompting your child to verbally perform (e.g. “Tell Grandma what happened at school today”), unless he wishes to do so on his own without persuasion.
- When you take your child somewhere new, tell him about it ahead of time, to prepare him for the types of things he will see, hear, and be expected to do.

Decrease time urgency

- Give your child the chance to answer one question before presenting another one.
- Provide a calmer, predictable, less-hurried life style within the home rather than maintaining fast-paced, hectic, or inconsistent family routines.
- Avoid giving the constant impression that “everything had to done yesterday”.

Be aware of environmental situations

- Observe situations that increase your child’s fluent behaviour, and increase those times (e.g. quiet one-on-one time, singing, reading stories, playing with pet animals).
- Some environmental factors that may have a negative effect on fluency include: new people, unfamiliar places, fatigue, charged emotions such as excitement or anger, competitive activities.
- Encourage more talking on the days when your child’s speech is more fluent (verbal games, reading books, talking to a variety of people). Decrease the need to talk on the days when speech is less fluent (watch TV, do a craft activity such as colouring).

Be aware of your reactions & responses

Show unconditional positive regard

- Find ways to show your child that you love and value him and that you enjoy your time together.
- Be careful of the emotional or implied messages you give to your child. For example, don't appear distressed, impatient, worried, or watchful about your child's speech.
- Respond to the message rather than the stuttering (i.e. pay attention to what your child says rather than to the way it is said). You don't want your child to feel that his worth depends on how well he talks.
- If your child appears frustrated with his speech, reassure him that everyone finds it difficult to talk sometimes. Give examples like "chrysanthemum", "linoleum", or "aluminum".
- Don't talk to others about your child's dysfluency when your child is present and/or listening.

Be an attentive listener

- Keep natural eye contact with your child when he is speaking.
- If you are doing something that requires your attention (such as driving), tell your child that you can't look at him right now but that you are listening to him.
- Avoid filling in or guessing what your child is about to say. Allow your child to finish his thoughts or ideas, and let the words be his own.

Be consistent in your discipline

- It doesn't matter so much what specific rules you set down, as long as these rules are in effect day after day.
- Consistent discipline has positive effects; it does not stress or distress the child as much as it helps him by providing clear boundaries, structure, predictability, and consistency in the child's life.
- Lack of discipline, or inconsistent discipline, leads to confusion, upset, and increased anxiety for the child.

Limit corrective advice

- Cease attempts to criticize or directly correct your child's speech or to give instructions or suggestions for how not to stutter (e.g. "Take a deep breath", "Slow down", "Relax", "Stop stuttering", "Take your time", "Think about what you are saying", "Start over again").
- Don't refer to your child as a "stutterer". He is a normal child who is still learning and developing his speech skills.
- Avoid talking for your child, completing his sentences, or helping him with a troublesome word.
- Don't try to teach any tricks or devices which you have heard may help (such as speaking to a beat or changing vocal pitch).
- Tell other people not to imitate or joke about your child's speech. This includes siblings, friends, relatives, neighbours, and babysitters. Be very frank about how you want others to react or respond to your child.
- Reinforce your child's fluent speech more so than trying to change or bring attention to his stuttering.

Be aware of your communication style

Slow down rate of speech

- ◆ Pause frequently when speaking with your child. This provides a good speech model, and gives more time for your child to process what you have said and to formulate his own thoughts.
- ◆ Spend at least five minutes each day devoted to talking with your child in an unhurried, easy, relaxed manner.
- ◆ Wait a few seconds before responding to your child's questions or comments.

Repeat and Rephrase

- ◆ Repeat or rephrase what your child says to verify that you have understood it.
- ◆ Reply slowly and unhurriedly using some of the same words your child used (e.g. if he says "I s-s-s-see the b-b-bunny", reply: "Oh, yes, I see the bunny, too. He's cute.")

Decrease Interruptions

- ◆ Provide opportunities for your child to talk to you without distractions or competition from others.
- ◆ Turn off the television and radio during meal time; this can be a time for family conversation without background noise.
- ◆ Appear interested in what your child is saying and show that you enjoy talking with him.
- ◆ Allow your child to complete his thoughts without interrupting.
- ◆ Don't let your child be an interrupter himself (e.g. competing with siblings to get into a conversation).
- ◆ Encourage each person in the family to listen to the other. When one speaks, the other listens and waits to take his turn.
- ◆ Implement three rules of conversation: Listen, Don't interrupt, Wait your turn.

Modify language complexity

- ◆ Recognize that certain language factors may have an effect on fluency (e.g. stuttering may increase when sentences are long and difficult to understand, when an unfamiliar topic is introduced, or when talking about past or future events instead of the present).
- ◆ Refrain from using long sentences or a large vocabulary.
- ◆ Avoid bombarding the child with many questions.