



Talk4Meaning

Supporting children's communication and learning
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What is stammering?

Stammering, stuttering or dysfluency (they all mean the same thing) appears in all parts of the world, and in all cultures. Children may repeat words or parts of words, or get stuck on particular sounds. The child who stammers may also show facial tension, or use extra body movements such as stamping his feet or clenching fists in an effort to 'push the words out'. Sometimes children try and avoid stammering by changing words or avoiding certain speaking situations. Some may be so good at hiding their problem that we do not notice that they stammer, or they may just become very quiet. Most children in preschool are likely to go on to become fluent speakers, but the advice we give parents is important.

How does stammering develop?

Many children pass through a phase called 'normal non-fluency,' between the ages of two and four, when children's speech and language develops very quickly. Most boys and girls pass through this phase, and become fluent speakers quite naturally, without anyone doing anything about it. Children usually repeat whole words at beginnings of sentences; e.g. 'Mummy, Mummy', and sometimes stretch out sounds in words; e.g. "Mmmmmmary, Mmmmmmary." They don't usually realise they are doing it. The non-fluency usually passes if parents and practitioners say things like, "Mummy's listening" or "Yes, darling, what is it you want to say?" or "Mary's got plenty of time to listen to you."

((If you say this, then you do need to make sure that you *are* listening, and you do have time to respond! This is not always easy in a busy setting!))

Signs that something more serious is happening may be when:

- Things don't improve, or get worse
- Children are aware of a problem and start to show tension in their face or make body movements to 'force words out'
- Children get stuck on the same words or sounds
- Children become aware of their problem and start avoiding using certain sounds or words.

Some children go on to develop a stammer and the child and family may need to seek professional advice and support. About 75% of children who actually begin to stammer when they are young go on to naturally recover, and become fluent speakers. Most children who develop stammers will be boys. Stammering may run in the family. Many parents will know of relatives who stammer, and will be worried that their child will be the same.

Helping parents

If a parent expresses a concern, it is always a good idea to advise them about what to do and say. It is not enough to tell them not to worry, or to ignore it.

Talk to parents about 'normal non-fluency' and advise them on what to say and how to behave. Being relaxed, listening to children with your full attention, and giving them time to express themselves, are usually all that is needed. You can model this to parents when you talk and play with the child yourself.

Keep an eye, with the parents, on how things progress. Parents from a family with a history of stammering may be particularly concerned, and may need more advice and support than other parents.

Speak to a Speech and Language Therapist and/or advisor about the problem. You may want to advise parents to refer themselves to a Speech and Language Therapist.

Great websites for ideas are www.stammeringcentre.org or www.stammering.org