



Stuttering Center of Western Pennsylvania

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Suggestions for Families of Young Children who Stutter

Stuttering occurs when a child has difficulty producing smooth, flowing speech. Stuttering is related to many different causes—a child's tendency to be disfluent in a given situation can be triggered by a variety of factors. One way to think about the problem is in terms of the *stressors* the child experiences and how these stressors interact with the child's ability to maintain fluency. Stressors include the way people react to stuttering, the communication model the child hears, and the time pressures the child feels. Stressors also come from within the child. A child may be more sensitive or reactive to the environment or the child may have perfectionistic tendencies. The child's abilities and environment combine to cause the child's fluency to break down. The following strategies may help children speak more easily by reducing these and other stressors.

1. Families should become aware of the *pace* of their conversations. They can reduce their pace by slightly slowing their speaking rate or increasing the pauses between words and speaking turns. This reduced pace minimizes time pressures provides a model of easy communication that the child can follow.
2. Parents should pause briefly before responding to the child's questions or comments. This demonstrates to the child that it is okay to "take one's time" to formulate an answer. It also gives the child permission not to rush into responding before he or she is ready.
3. Parents can reduce time pressures associated with frequent, demanding questions by replacing with indirect requests, comments, or observations. This allows the child to continue participating in the conversation without being required to respond to frequent demands for speaking.
4. Families can reduce requests for "performance" or "demand" speech. The child should not be required to speak if he wishes to be quiet. For example, he may smile or wave in greeting or hold up his fingers to indicate his age, rather than using words if he does not want to. Also, performances, such as reciting poems for family members, should be minimized if the child is not comfortable talking in such situations.
5. Families should listen to *what the child is saying*, rather than how the child is saying it. Corrective feedback about rate, smoothness, grammar, articulation, etc., can be made indirectly by repeating all or part of the child's utterance. This acknowledges the child's content without criticizing the manner of speaking.
6. Families should take turns when talking. Interruptions should be reduced or eliminated wherever possible to minimize time pressures the child may feel.
7. Parents should acknowledge and respect the ideas and feelings of their child. Although a parent may not agree with their child's opinions, the child should still have the right to express them.
8. Parents can review family routines and reduce unnecessary pressure about tasks and deadlines. This helps to further reduce time pressures the child may experience.
9. Children benefit when parents are consistent in setting limits and in dealing with misbehavior. Enforcing such boundaries adds safety to a child's world and may reduce stressors that affect fluency.
10. Above all, a child needs positive attention from his parents, as well as appreciation and pleasure in daily accomplishments – even small and routine ones.

By keeping these suggestions in mind, parents can facilitate their child's development of more fluent speech and support the clinician's work in therapy. This can make a difference for the child's fluency and overall speech/language development.