



Stuttering Center of Western Pennsylvania

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Information for Parents of Young Children Who Stutter

What Is Stuttering?

Stuttering is a communication disorder characterized by disruptions in the forward flow of speech ("speech disfluencies"), such as repetitions of parts of words, prolongations of sounds, or complete blockages of sound. Speech disfluencies may be accompanied by physical tension or struggle, though many young children do not exhibit such tension in the early stages of the disorder.

Stuttering is highly variable – sometimes a child will stutter a lot and sometimes the child will speak fluently. Factors influencing the likelihood that stuttering will occur differ from one child to the next, but might include:

- The child's conversational partners or the topic of the child's conversation
- What the child is doing while talking and where the child is when talking
- What is going on in the child's life at the time of the conversation
- The child's emotional or physical state (e.g., excitement, fatigue, illness)
- The length and complexity of the message the child is trying to convey
- Other factors that are more difficult to identify

Many times, children experience fear or embarrassment because of their stuttering. This is not surprising, because stuttering "stands out" in the child's speech. As a result, children may try to *hide* their stuttering so it does not show as much. They may do this by avoiding speaking in certain situations or to certain people. They may also avoid saying words they think they might stutter on or refrain from talking altogether. If a child begins to avoid speaking to prevent stuttering, the disorder can have a marked impact on his or her social, emotional, and educational development.

Sometimes, older children and adolescents become so adept at hiding stuttering that other people may not even know that they stutter. Although this might sound like a good goal, it typically is not. Hiding stuttering takes a lot of emotional and cognitive effort and results in a significant feeling of shame for the person who stutters. This, in turn, often limits the child's ability to participate in life activities at school or in social settings. The best way to deal with stuttering is not to try to hide it, or to hide from it, but rather to face it directly.

What Causes Stuttering?

There is no single cause of stuttering. Current research indicates that *many* different factors play a role in the development of stuttering, including genetic inheritance, the child's language skills, the child's ability to move his or her mouth when speaking, the child's temperament, and the reactions of those in the child's environment.

How Do We Treat Stuttering

For very young children (age 2½ to 5 or 6), the primary goal of treatment is to help the child learn to speak fluently. We do this by teaching the child to change the timing and the tension of speech production through modeling and play-based activities, both in the therapy room and at home. Treatment of children in this age range can be highly effective, with many children exhibiting complete recovery by approximately age 6.

For older children and adolescents, it is more difficult to eliminate stuttering, and the child is more likely to experience the shame and embarrassment that characterizes advanced stuttering in adults. Improving fluency is still a major focus of treatment; however, a necessary additional goal involves helping children to develop healthy, positive attitudes toward themselves and their speech, even if they still stutter. Parents play a central role in this process by conveying acceptance of their child's speaking abilities and by providing a supportive environment where the child can both stutter *and* learn to speak more fluently.

How Can Parents Help?

It is important to remember that parents do not cause stuttering. Still, there are several things parents can do to help their child speak more fluently. Parents of young children can help by: (i) providing a model of an easier, more fluent way of speaking, (ii) reducing demands on the child to speak (particularly demands to speak fluently), and (iii) minimizing the time pressures a child may feel when speaking.

Modeling. Children tend to be more disfluent when they or the people around them talk more quickly. This is due partly to the increased time pressures children may feel and also to the children's own attempts to speak more quickly as he tries to keep up. Family members (particularly parents and primary caregivers) should be aware of their speaking rate and make a conscious effort to reduce the overall pace of their interactions with the child.

Beyond reducing their own communication pace, parents can model an easier, more relaxed way of speaking. One way to do this is by *reflecting* the child's sentences back to him or her, using a slightly slower speaking rate, then *expanding* on the child's utterance when responding to a question. For example, if the child says "I want to play outside now," parents can respond using a slightly slower rate, saying "You want to play outside now? (pause) That would be fine." This gives the child an example of how to speak more easily and more fluently using a slower speaking rate.

Reducing Demands. Often, people in the child's environment feel uncomfortable when a child stutters. There is sometimes an irresistible urge to try to help children by telling them to "speak more slowly" or to "stop, take a breath, and think about what they want to say." Although this might sound like good advice, it may make the child more self-conscious about his stuttering. (Keep in mind that advice to slow down is typically given only when the child is having difficulty with fluency, and not when the child speaks rapidly but is able to maintain fluency.) The same is true about finishing a child's words or making seemingly supportive comments about his or her fluency (e.g., "you said that so fluently"). Although such statements may seem positive, children may interpret them as corrections since they may not know what they did differently to make their speech fluent. In general, it is best to avoid any such corrections or demands for the child to speak fluently. In treatment, children will be taught how to make these changes in their speech, and you will learn ways to respond to their children's fluent and disfluent speech in a supportive manner.

Parents are naturally proud of their children's ability to memorize stories and rhymes, and they may ask their children to give performances for friends or family. Although some children enjoy these activities, this "demand speech" places can make it hard for the child to maintain fluency. Although it is important to show pride in children's accomplishments, particularly those related to speech, it may be helpful to also find ways for the child to demonstrate his skills that will be less demanding on fluency (e.g., physical activities, math games, or coloring and painting – in addition to talking).

Still another form of demand involves the use of complicated language. Children are more disfluent when they use longer or more complex sentences. When a child is particularly disfluent, therefore, it may be helpful for parents to limit their use of open-ended questions requiring long, complex answers (e.g., “what did you do at school today?”). Instead, parents can try using closed-ended questions requiring shorter, simpler answers (e.g., “did you have fun at school today?” or “did you go outside during recess?”). Parents can also encourage the child to talk without asking questions at all, for example, by simply commenting on the child’s activities (e.g., “I wonder if it’s going to rain while you’re at school”) and giving him an *opportunity* to respond. The key is to manage the child’s speaking situations carefully – at times when he is speaking more fluently, parents can feel comfortable stimulating his language by using more open-ended questions; at other times, parents can help him communicate successfully without requiring long, complicated sentences.

Minimizing Time Pressure. One way parents can reduce time pressures a child may feel is to model and use a slower speaking pace. Another technique is to pause *briefly* before answering the child’s questions. This gives the child the time he needs to ask and answer questions, and it teaches him not to rush into responding during his own speaking turns. This technique shows the child how to take enough time before speaking to formulate his answers more fully.

Another benefit of using pauses is that it helps children learn to *take turns* when speaking. The normal flow of conversation involves turn-taking. That is, only one person speaks at a time. If two people are competing for talking time, or if one person interrupts another, there is a tendency for their rate of speech to increase and for the speakers to feel pressure to get their message out quickly. This time pressure is particularly challenging for children who stutter, so it is best to take turns when talking. Each person gets an opportunity to talk without fear of being interrupted and without the need to hurry. Parents can demonstrate this in their own speech by not interrupting the child (a part of pausing between speaker turns) and by managing the talking turns of other children so each child gets his or her turn to talk.

Finally, parents can reduce time pressures by reviewing daily routines to make sure the child’s schedule is not so busy that it does not leave time to talk about his or her experiences in a slow and unhurried manner. It is certainly good for children to have full and active lives; however, some children may benefit more from participating enjoying fewer activities at a slightly slower pace.

Finally, for older children or for children who have exhibited concern about their speech, parents can supplement these strategies with other techniques to help children develop healthy, positive attitudes about their speaking abilities.

Listen to Content rather than Manner. Stuttering draws attention to itself, so it is not surprising that parents and others may be more likely to hear the stuttering, rather than the message the child is trying to convey. Children quickly become aware of this, and this can increase their sense of shame or embarrassment about stuttering. To reduce these negative feelings, parents should be sure to focus on and respond to their child’s *message* and to “talk about what the child talks about.” Parents can help themselves focus on the child’s content (rather than the manner in which the child speaks) by developing a “talking log,” in which they keep track of the topics the child raises in conversation during the day.

Respond to Stuttering in an Accepting Manner. No parent would want their child to stutter; however, it is important for parents to convey complete acceptance of the child, *including acceptance of stuttering*. Children’s self-esteem and self-acceptance are highly dependent upon the acceptance of others, particularly their parents. If parents convey the message that stuttering is bad, or something to be ashamed of, then it is more likely that the child will believe this, too. This can cause his shame to increase. Importantly, it is the child’s negative reactions to stuttering that determines whether he will be negatively affected by his speech, not the number of disfluencies he produces. In treatment, children will learn to be more fluent; however, they will not be as successful if they have already developed negative attitudes about themselves and their speech.

Some Helpful Tips

Speaking More Slowly. Learning to speak slowly can be quite challenging, both for children and for parents. Many parents are accustomed to a fast rate of speech, and they initially feel that slower speech feels unnatural. The best way for parents to learn how to reduce their pace is to start just *5 minutes a day*, during a simple activity such as reading a child's book (Dr. Seuss books are great for this). The key to reducing pace is to use *pauses* between words and between phrases. For example (the spaces indicate pauses a little less than one second long):

“ One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish. ”
“ This is a story about a little girl named Goldilocks. ”

After practicing when reading, parents can begin to use this strategy in conversation. The best example of how to talk to young children is Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. Watching Mr. Rogers can also help parents become more comfortable with a slower speaking rate.

Managing Turn-Taking. Another challenging strategy is learning to follow turn-taking rules. This is especially true for parents who have more than one child. You help all of your children learn to take turns when talking by playing simple and familiar games such as “Go Fish” or “Hi-ho Cherry-O.” All of these games are based on turn-taking – to play the game, each child takes a turn, and the game cannot proceed until every child takes their turn. By highlighting the way that players are taking turns, parents can gently direct their children's attention to turn-taking rules that will facilitate their fluency in conversational speech.

Treat Stuttering Like Any Other Behavior. Parents are often confused about what to say when their children stutter, particularly following a tense or long disfluency. Many parents have been told not to draw attention to their children's stuttering for fear that this will make the stuttering worse. We feel that a better approach is to treat stuttering just like any other difficulty the child may experience when learning a difficult task (e.g., learning to skip or ride a bicycle). If a child falls while learning to ride a bicycle, parents do not refrain from commenting for fear that he will become self-conscious about his bicycle-riding skills. Instead, they rush to him, pick him up and give him a hug, encourage him to try it again, and praise him for his courage in learning a new skill. The exact same approach should be taken with stuttering. Parents can use their own parenting style to encourage their child and to build confidence about speaking. This also helps bring stuttering into the open so children will feel more comfortable talking about it and expressing their own feelings of fear and frustration.

Remember – These strategies take time to learn.

Do not feel discouraged if you find them difficult at first.

You will receive training about how to make these changes during treatment.

Some Things to Watch For

Normal disfluencies can be hard to distinguish from stuttering. Also, the severity of stuttering can fluctuate over time, even if the child is in therapy. Some signs that might indicate that stuttering severity is increasing include:

- Increased iterations during repetitions (e.g., 5 iterations of “I” in “I-I-I-I-I want that”)
- Increased proportion of prolongations rather than repetitions (e.g., “IIIIIIII want that.”)
- Complete blockages of speech (e.g., child opens mouth to speak but no sound comes out)
- Noticeable physical tension or struggle during disfluencies
- Changes in pitch during prolongations or irregular rhythm during repetitions
- Apparent signs of fear or frustration immediately prior to or following disfluencies
- Indications that the child is substituting words to avoid stuttering
- Indications that the child is avoiding talking in certain situations or to certain people

If parents notice any of these behaviors, they should discuss them with a licensed and certified speech-language pathologist who specializes in childhood stuttering.