

► Stuttering

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Description of problem

Everybody might experience a disruption in the flow of speech at any point in a conversation. Usually such disruptions do not constitute a problem and may go unnoticed. Stuttering occurs when such disruptions (that may include part word repetition, prolongation and blocks), interfere with a person's ability to communicate effectively. Secondary features, that may include tension in the facial muscles resulting in inappropriate grimacing and frowning, may sometimes accompany stuttering. Other secondary features may result in avoidance of use of speech in given circumstances. Stuttering adults might also experience embarrassment and distress due to the difficulty experienced in daily conversation.

Possible causes of stuttering

A child needs to be able to build a balance between demands and capacities. This balance will help him feel confident and secure. Demands may arise from other people's actions, by what they say or do and how the child perceives this.

Certain people may demand from the child to speak clearly and be able to answer many questions, providing the right information and also to reply quickly. At this point, the child then notices his own capacities/capabilities and may want to please his parents and other adults around him by doing things well. In the mean time, the child will try to compete in a noisy situation and try to overcome interruptions.

A child needs to have a large vocabulary for him to be able to speak fluently. He needs to know how to join words together and form proper sentences (grammar). He also needs to know when and where he should use the 'right word' or correct sentence. Listening and understanding what

others say plays an important role in a child's language development. Motor development will help the child articulate sounds appropriately and produce intelligible speech.

All these abilities are affected by how the child feels as well as by the demands placed upon him. It is easier for the child to speak well if he feels happy, confident, listened to, sure of what he says etc. If the child feels upset, tired, unwell, overexcited or unimportant etc, than speaking can be difficult.

What to look out for

- Repetitions of syllables ex. te te te teddy;
- Repetitions of words (especially at the beginning of a sentence) ex. like like like;
- Prolongations of sounds ex. f f f fish;
- The pitch of the child's voice may rise with repetitions and occasionally the child may experience a 'block' – no airflow or voice for a few seconds;
- gets stuck to start saying a word in a phrase;
- secondary features ex. eye blinking, mouth tremors.

When is it a concern

One should seek help from a speech-language pathologist if:

- The child has been stuttering for more than 4 months.
- The child gets stuck starting or trying to say sounds or words.
- You are concerned about your child 'stuttering' and think it's getting worse.
- The child has noticed that he has a problem talking and is upset or afraid when he speaks.
- The child struggles to speak and sometimes he gives up and stops talking.
- The child's stuttering improves for a few days and then tends to get worse again.
- The child repeats words or syllables ex. 'oh- oh – oh –open the box please?'
- The child stretches out sounds in words ex. 's-s-s- -snakes' or 'liiiiike chocolate milk'.

How to Help

- Try to model slow and relaxed speech when talking with your child and encourage other family members to do the same. A slow rate of speech can be most effective when combined with some time each day for the child to have one parent's undivided attention.
- When your child talks to you or asks you a question, try to pause a second or so before you answer. This will help make talking to your child less hurried and more relaxed.
- Try not to show your anxiety or be upset when your child stammers. Your patient attitude will help him immensely. Always face the child when he speaks to you, as this will make your child understand that he is being given attention and time to speak. Try to keep eye contact in order to show the child that you are interested in what he has to say.
- Do not comment on the child's dysfluency in his presence in order not to make the child aware that there is something strange in the way he is talking.
- Never try to help the dysfluent child by finishing off his sentences or speak in his place.
- It is better for the child not to copy his dysfluent speech as this may lead to embarrassment and can lead to avoidance in speaking.
- Not putting pressure on the child to speak is also beneficial.

Useful links

British Stammering Association : www.stammering.org

International Stuttering Association : www.stutterisa.org