

Stammering Advice for Pre-school Children

What is Stammering?

Stammering (which is also known as Stuttering) is a condition that makes it physically harder to speak. It is defined as moments when the flow of speech is interrupted and words/sounds get stuck, even though the child knows exactly what they want to say.

Everyone stumbles over their words from time to time in every day life and this may present as:

Phrase repetition e.g. *"I want-I want that"* or use of fillers e.g. *"he is playing umm football"* However, a stammer is when speech is presented in the following ways:

Repetitions of whole words or sounds in words e.g. *"m...m...maybe we can have ice cream?"*

Prolongations where sounds within the word are stretched e.g. *"sssssometimes I like to sing."*

Blocking where the child is ready to say the word but tension prevents it from coming out of their mouth as planned (can be silent or hear some noise) e.g. *".....my name is Bob."*

Some children also show secondary behaviours when they speak such as foot tapping, sharp intake of breath, blinking, clicking, chin tucking and avoiding certain words.



What do we know about Stammering?

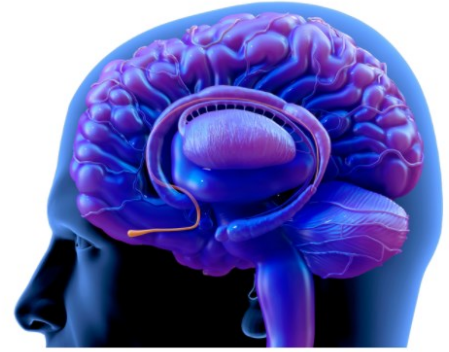
In pre-schoolers, stammering is not uncommon, affecting 8 in 100 children aged 2ys—5yrs. Around 6/8 of those children will not continue to stammer past 7 yrs old (transient stammering) and around 2/8 of those children will have a persistent stammer that stays with them as they grow older. At the moment, there is not enough research to confidently say which children will or will not have a persistent stammer.

We know that stammering occurs in all parts of the world, across all cultures, religions and groups of people. There is no link between stammering and intellectual ability and it has nothing to do with someone's character e.g. being shy or nervous. Many influential people have a stammer (like Joe Biden — President of the United States) and it is not something that should ever get in the way of your child doing what they would like to do and achieving their goals.



What causes Stammering?

Current research has not reached a complete answer yet on what causes stammering. Brain imaging studies have shown that children who stammer have slight physical differences in the areas of the brain that control the start/stop timing of their speech and that the connections in the brain can be overloaded when speaking. This makes speaking more difficult. This difference within the brain occurs at some point during early childhood development and is linked to genetics (the DNA that the child is born with.) We know that 60% of people who stammer also have a family member who stammers and that boys are also more likely to stammer than girls. There might also be other factors that Scientists and SLT's have not researched yet. Parents do NOT cause stammering or could have done anything to prevent stammering. However, how you respond to the child when they are stammering can make all the difference to how they feel and how easy it is for them to speak.



How does stammering impact my child?

Some children who stammer may develop negative thoughts or feelings about their talking or themselves due to their experiences of stammering, and research shows us that children are aware of their stammer or differences in their talking as early as 3 years old.



For preschool children, these negative thoughts can be externalised or represented as a metaphor e.g. "*the grumpy monkey*". The principal is that there is a character who represents self-talk and who is responsible for what they are thinking/feeling when it's not happy thoughts.

Teach your child that you can lessen the "*the grumpy monkey's*" impact by:

- ⇒ Talking about the fact that everybody has a grumpy monkey – mummy and daddy do and it is not always helpful.
- ⇒ Saying "*go away grumpy monkey*" bringing the concept into everyday situations and challenging any potential beliefs that the child may have perceived about themselves that aren't true e.g. "*I am not very good at reading out loud,*" "*that sounds a bit like grumpy monkey is in your head, stand up to him and tell him no your reading is very good!*"
- ⇒ Acknowledge when the child ignored the grumpy monkey reinforcing that's a really good thing to do e.g. "*you kept drawing your picture, you ignored grumpy monkey, well done!*"

What can I do to help?

- ⇒ Have one-on-one time (just five minutes every day) with your child, where they aren't competing for attention with tasks or other family members.
- ⇒ Use short, simple sentences and don't ask too many questions. If you do have to ask a question, make sure you ask one at a time and give plenty of time to answer.
- ⇒ Keep natural eye-contact with your child, listen to what your child is saying, not how they say it and smile to show them they are doing a great job at talking to you.
- ⇒ Make sure you keep your reactions positive (e.g. facial expressions, the words you use) when you hear your child stammer. Try to use neutral language, for example talking about their stammer as "more" or "less", rather than "bad" or "good".
- ⇒ Make sure everyone in the conversation gets a turn and manage teasing/sibling rivalry.
- ⇒ Be open about stammering with the child, acknowledge when speaking is hard and reassure them it's ok to find something difficult. Ask your child how you can help as children are experts in their own stammer. It is much better to be open and ask about their stammer or how they want you to help them.
- ⇒ Encourage good sleep routines and reduce the busyness/pace of family life where possible.
- ⇒ Build confidence with specific praise about values rather than ability e.g. "I liked how you wanted to help me with that."
- ⇒ Don't interrupt the child by saying slow down or take a breath, this will make them stammer more. Model to them by speaking with an unhurried pace with lots of pauses — they are likely to copy you and this will help slow down their speech.
- ⇒ Don't respond to them straight away — show them that having at least 5 seconds of thinking time is helpful.

How can I find out more about Stammering?

The following websites have support and advice for parents and children who stammer:

- ⇒ Stamma.org
- ⇒ Michaelpalincentreforstammering.org
- ⇒ Actionforstammeringchildren.org
- ⇒ Coventrychildrensslts.co.uk

Go to onevoicecoventry.co.uk and

coventry.gov.uk (send local offer for Coventry) to see what support is available locally.

There is also a Facebook group 'UK Peer Support Group For Parents Of Children Who Stammer' for parents to support each other and share experiences.

Steggie's Stutter—A book to read with young children about a dinosaur who has a stammer.