

Stammering Advice for Teaching Staff

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?

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 the 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 adults 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.

What is the impact of stammering?



Some children who stammer may develop negative thoughts or feelings about their talking or themselves due to their experiences of stammering.

Research shows us that children are aware of their stammer or differences in their talking as early as 3 years old.

It is quite common to feel anxious about speaking situations or stammering and a lot of children who stammer experience this.

The child who stammers may be open about this or try to hide their thoughts and feelings.

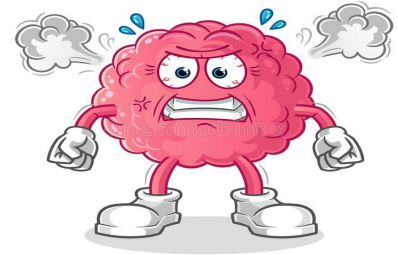
It's not possible to completely stop feeling anxious as our brains have evolved in such a way to feel anxious so that we are alert. Please see the 'Happiness Trap: the evolution of the human mind' on Youtube.

However how people respond to the child who stammers either verbally or by their actions/body language can affect how that child feels and whether they have confidence to speak in front of others. If adults around the child acknowledge and accept the stammer or negative thoughts and feelings, the more likely the child who stammers will feel good about themselves and their speech.

How can I reduce the impact of stammering?

Using the 'brain bully' metaphor

For school age children, we can support children to represent these negative thoughts as a metaphor e.g. "*the brain bully*". The idea here 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 the child that they can lessen the "*brain bully's*" impact by:

- ⇒ Talking about the fact that everybody has a brain bully e.g. Mummy and Daddy do and it is not always helpful.
- ⇒ Encourage the child not to listen to the brain bully!
- ⇒ Saying "*go away brain bully*" being very repetitive and bringing the concept into everyday situations e.g. "*my drawing is rubbish,*" "*I think the brain bully is saying mean things about your drawing – you tell him "I love my picture."*
- ⇒ 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 brain bully is in your head, stand up to him and tell him no it doesn't matter what he thinks your reading is very good!*"
- ⇒ Acknowledge when the child ignored the brain bully reinforcing that's a really good thing to do e.g. "*you kept drawing your picture, you ignored the brain bully, well done.*"
- ⇒ This can also be practised using emotion picture cards e.g. the girl is crying – the brain bully said she doesn't have any friends – she needs a hug.
- ⇒ You can use this a whole class approach and model when your brain bully speaks up and you ignore him in class e.g. "*my brain bully just said I cant run very fast but I am going to run anyway.*"
- ⇒ Emphasise when peers in class have ignored their brain bully too e.g. "*John's brain bully told him he couldn't add up those numbers, but he asked for help and kept trying, he ignored his brain bully, well done John!*"

What can I do to help?

Make sure your reactions are positive

- ⇒ Whilst the child is talking make sure to maintain natural eye contact (without staring) and positive facial expressions. Smile to show them they are doing a great job at talking to you.
- ⇒ Try to focus on what the child is saying rather than how the child is saying it.
- ⇒ Whilst waiting for the child to finish try to appear relaxed and make sure your body language is not giving them a signal to hurry up.
- ⇒ Be mindful about using neutral words to describe the stammer, use **more vs. less** rather than good vs. bad e.g. 'They stammered more today.'

Put yourself in the child's shoes

- ⇒ Think about speaking situations from the child's point of view, some speaking situations are harder than others..
- ⇒ It may be easier for the child who stammers to indicate when they are ready to speak. They may want to volunteer or they may prefer you to pick them.
- ⇒ Waiting for their turn may add pressure (during the register), as can speaking at the end of a lesson when classmates are eager to leave.
- ⇒ Giving pupils who stammer early turns or adopting a random style of turn selection can help.
- ⇒ Encourage everyone to contribute in class. A hierarchy for reading and speaking tasks can help those who stammer feel able to contribute. Begin with short spoken contributions to a small audience of familiar faces, if necessary allowing pupils to read or answer in unison. Then increase the length of contributions, and/or the size or familiarity of the audience.

Ask the child how you can help

- ⇒ Children are experts in their own stammer, it is much better to be open and talk to them privately about their stammer or how they want you to help them.
- ⇒ Acknowledge that speaking can be difficult but that's ok and openly discuss this with the child (as appropriate) e.g. "I can see that was hard for you, but you kept going", 'some words are hard to get out, but its okay I'm listening'.



Increase the child's confidence

- ⇒ Give specific praise or positive reinforcement (not necessarily about their speech). Comment on their *values* rather than ability e.g. "I liked how you wanted to help me with that."
- ⇒ Give the child opportunities in tasks that they can succeed in. Talk about their strengths, as well as discussing their challenge with speaking and explore how this makes them feel.

Manage teasing or bullying immediately

- ⇒ We know that children who stammer can be more at risk of being bullied or teased, so please make sure you respond to any intentional or unintentional negative comments or reactions promptly and sensitively. Follow your schools anti-bullying policy.
- ⇒ Discuss what stammering is (with the child's agreement) with the class. If you need any assistance with this, please contact the child's Speech and Language Therapist.
- ⇒ Help the child come up with responses to teasing, where the whole class could work out solutions to bullying together e.g. I can talk to my Teacher.
- ⇒ Help the child to develop resilience and have a "I can handle this" attitude, support the child to use a calm response like "yes, I stammer sometimes".

Encourage a calm classroom environment which enables fluency

- ⇒ Avoid telling the child what to do (e.g. stop, slow down, take a breath, hurry up) because it tends to increase pressure on them, and therefore make them stammer more.
- ⇒ Model a *relaxed, slow style* of speaking in your own speech, the child can therefore pick up on this and reflect it back in their own speech.
- ⇒ Encourage *thinking time*, model this in your own speech by pausing before responding to questions and regularly throughout your sentences. Praise this when the pupils in your class show thinking time too.
- ⇒ 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.
- ⇒ Be clear about how important it is for each person in the classroom to be listened to and to have a turn to talk if they want to. Ensure all pupils take turns and don't get rewarded for shouting out.
- ⇒ Be aware of peers speaking for the child who stammers and try not to finish the child's sentences. The child can speak for themselves but may just need time and not to be interrupted.



Find out about previous and current therapy

- ⇒ Speak to the parents and child and/or contact the child's Speech and Language Therapist.
- ⇒ Take Action! If you think a pupil in your class has a stammer and they are not known to Speech and Language Therapy, speak to Parents and if appropriate help them make a referral. You can make a referral via your SENCO. Speech therapy can be helpful whatever the child's age, it is not always about making the child fluent but helping the child build their confidence or broaden their experience of speaking situations.
- ⇒ Find out which speaking situations the child finds challenging and encourage small steps to participate in them e.g. if the aim is answering a question in class, practise answering easy questions in a small group first. Track progress and offer praise for their achievements.

Share awareness

- ⇒ Ensure everyone (admin, catering and teaching staff) who comes into contact with the child knows how to help. Share this advice leaflet.
- ⇒ Encourage the child to create a card with key information about their stammer, to share with others. You can download a card on stamma.org > resources > 'I Stammer' cards

How can I find out more about Stammering?

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

- ⇒ Stamma.org

There are lots of resources, videos and a podcast on resources > professionals > teachers

- ⇒ Michaelpalincentreforstammering.org

See about stammering > teachers for further advice and 'Wait I'm not finished yet' video, hear what pupils who stammer want their Teachers to know about stammering

- ⇒ Actionforstammeringchildren.org

There is advice and videos on support > for schools - look at the video 'MyStammeringTap' a video from a child who stammers and 'Tips for Teachers with Abed Ahmed' (for further information you can also check out BBC Three Amazing Humans: The Teacher helping young people find their voice.)

- ⇒ Coventrychildrenslt.co.uk

- ⇒ Go to onevoicecoventry.co.uk and coventry.gov.uk (send local offer for Coventry) to see what support is available locally.