

# 11: Stammering

## Simply Speaking: The Early Years

You might notice that there are times when the child stumbles over words or is hesitant when talking.

You might hear the child say part of a word, or a whole word again, once or twice, like “Mu Mummy” or you might hear them repeat words and phrases again like “I I”, “I want.....I want a banana”. You might notice that they use words such as “um” or “er” when they are thinking about what they want to say next.

Lots of children between the ages of two and five years will go through phases where their talking sounds like this. This is called dysfluency.

Dysfluency is part of the normal process of learning how to speak. It happens when children learn new skills with their language. For example, it might be that the child has learnt to put words together to say longer sentences or that they have learnt lots of new words.

### What is Stammering?

Stammering, or stuttering, is different to dysfluency.

If you notice the child is doing one or more of the following then they could be stammering:

- Saying a whole word over and over again **multiple times** ‘like like like like this’.
- Saying part of a word over and over again **multiple times** ‘li li li li like this’.
- Stretching sounds out in words ‘liiiiiiiiiiiike this’.
- Looking like they are trying to say a sound but there is a delay in the sound coming out. This is called blocking.
- Looking away when they are struggling to talk.
- Showing tension in their face when they are struggling to talk. This might look like grimacing when speaking, going red in the face or showing tension around their eyes or mouth.
- Holding their breath when speaking or breathing in an unusual way when talking.
- Their voice might rise and fall whilst they are trying to say a word when they are struggling to talk.

- Using parts of their body to try to force words out when they are trying to talk. You might see them do things like nodding their head forwards or stamping their feet when they are trying to say a word that they are stuck on.
- Hiding their stammer by changing words that they thought they were going to get stuck on to words that they think they can say without stammering; for example, saying 'bath' instead of 'swimming pool'. You might also notice that they might avoid saying certain words or they might stop talking in certain situations.

According to the British Stammering Association, around 75% of children will go on to speak fluently, either spontaneously or with the help of speech and language therapy.

**Top Tip:** *Try completing the stammering checklist below (see 11.1 Is The Child Stammering?) to help you notice what the child does when they are stammering. This will help you to track changes in the child's stammer to see whether it is getting better or worse over time and help you to decide if you need to refer them for further support.*

### **Why do children stammer?**

Stammering is a complex, multi-factorial disorder. There is not one specific reason as to why children stammer. Instead, it is a complex relationship between how a child has been 'built' and how resilient they are to managing demands placed on them.

We know that some children are built in such a way that it means they are more vulnerable to stammering. This might be because of their gender (boys are more likely to stammer than girls) or because of a history of stammering in the family; information about whether that individual continued to stammer as an adult is also helpful as children may follow a similar pattern with their own stammer. Research has also identified that there are subtle differences in how the brain works, particularly in areas responsible for sensory integration and motor planning between fluent speakers and those who stammer. Children can also be more vulnerable to stammering if they experience difficulties with their speech and language skills or if their speech and language skills are felt to be advanced!

As well as each child being built in different ways, each child also has their own set of individual resources. They can rely on these resources to help them manage the demands placed on their communication skills, emotional skills and intellectual skills. One explanation of stammering is that when the demands on these skill areas are high, and are greater than the child's capabilities to cope, stammering can increase.

### **When do children stammer?**

You might notice that the child's stammer varies throughout the day, depending on who they are with and what they are doing. Often children stammer more when they are tired, excited or anxious about something. Stammering can also increase when talking in larger groups of people rather than with just one person. You might notice that the child goes through phases of stammering where they will have a period of fluency before stammering again. It is entirely normal for children to show different patterns to their stammer but it is important to notice when it happens so you that you can be ready to support your child during these times.

**Top Tip:** *Try using the checklist below (see 11.1 Is The Child Stammering?) to try to work out in which situations the child communicates more easily and which situations are more difficult. Try to support the child by using more of the strategies suggested below in the situations that cause more difficulties for the child.*

### **When should I worry?**

If you notice that the child has been stammering for more than six months, and you feel that there has been little or no improvement, it is recommended that you complete a Request for Assistance form

<https://www.ghc.nhs.uk/our-teams-and-services/childrens-slt/childrens-salt-request-for-assistance/>

A Request for Assistance form should also be completed if you feel that the child is bothered by their stammer or if you feel it is affecting their confidence in speaking.

### **What can I do to help?**

The acronym STAMMER reminds you about the key things you can do to support the child when they are stammering:

**S****low down:** Try to slow down when you talk to the child. You could try pausing before speaking, as well as between sentences, to slow down the pace of the conversation.

**T****ake Turns:** Encourage everyone at home to take turns when speaking.

**Accept the bumps:** Accept that, for the time being, the child's talking sounds a little bumpy. Try to focus on *what* they are saying rather than *how* they are speaking. It is important to show the child that stammering is okay.

**Match your language:** Try to match how you speak to the child with how they speak to you. Try to use similar words and sentences as they do to make sure that you are making talking as easy as possible for them.

**Make comments:** Try to use comments or choices when talking to the child instead of direct questions. You could try offering a choice e.g. 'did you play outside or do painting today at nursery?' or making a comment e.g. 'I think you did painting today...I can see paint on your nose!' instead of asking the direct question such as 'what did you do at nursery today?'

**Eye contact:** Try to maintain natural eye contact with the child when they are stammering. It is important that you can show them that you are comfortable with how they are speaking.

**Recognise what's going well:** Recognise what is going well with the child's communication skills. Help them to understand that talking is not just about being fluent as it also involves a lot of other communication skills too! Use specific praise to help them know exactly what is going well; for example, 'well done for waiting for your brother to finish speaking!'

Written with reference to the British Stammering Association and the Stuttering Foundation.

## 11.1: Is The Child Stammering?

**Choose three or four situations over the day when you can really tune into the child and listen to their talking.**

**I listened to the child when:**

Situation One:

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Situation Two:

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Situation Three:

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Situation Four:

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**Now think about what you noticed about the child's talking during these times.**

**I heard the child do this when they were talking:**

\*Saying a word again once or twice e.g. 'can.....can' ☐

\*Saying a sentence again once or twice e.g. 'can I.....can I have a drink?' ☐

\*Using fillers and revisions e.g. 'um, I want a.....errr can I have a drink?' ☐

Repeating a word multiple times e.g. 'can can can....' ☐

Repeating a sound in a word multiple times e.g. 'mu mu mu mummy' ☐

Prolonging (stretching out) a sound in a word e.g. 'muuuuuuuuummy' ☐

Blocking (looking like they are trying to say a word but no sound is coming out) ☐

*(If the child is only doing the \* starred characteristics and none of the other characteristics in this section or the remaining sections then it sounds like they are experiencing some normal dysfluency as their language skills develop)*

Notes:

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**I saw the child do this when they were talking:**

Looking away when they are struggling to talk ☐

Showing tension in their face when they are struggling to talk: eyes ☐

mouth ☐

throat ☐

Showing tension in their body when they are struggling to talk: shoulders ☐

chest ☐

hands/arms ☐

legs/feet ☐

Holding their breath/breathing in an unusual way ☐

Using parts of their body to force words out ☐

The voice rising and falling when they are struggling to say a word ☐

**Notes:**

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**I noticed the child was trying to hide their stammer by:**

- |                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Changing a word            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoiding saying a word     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Giving up/stopping talking | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Notes:**

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You will now have an indication as to whether the child is experiencing normal dysfluency or is showing signs of having a stammer.

If you have only ticked the starred characteristics, please implement the advice given above and monitor change over time. If you feel it is not improving over a six month period, further support can be requested for the child by completing the online Request for Assistance form: <https://www.ghc.nhs.uk/our-teams-and-services/childrens-slt/childrens-salt-request-for-assistance/>

If you have ticked characteristics that are not starred, the child would benefit from further specialist assessment into their speech, language and fluency skills so that further support can be offered. Please complete the online Request for Assistance form: <https://www.ghc.nhs.uk/our-teams-and-services/childrens-slt/childrens-salt-request-for-assistance/>

