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What Do You Know About Stuttering? A Parent's and Teacher's Guide to Fluency

by Keri Spielvogel, M.C.D., CCC-SLP

A child comes into the therapy room with his mother. He is eight years old. As his mother tells you about his stuttering, he looks embarrassed. He squirms in his seat and looks at the floor, but won't interject or express his feelings about his speech.

This particular example is real. The boy had a severe fluency disorder and was well aware of his speaking patterns. He experienced 42 instances of dysfluency while reading a 100-word passage from his school reading book. Upon close observation, you noticed that he clenched his jaw, gripped his leg, and shut his eyes when he stuttered, all classic secondary behaviors. He avoided speaking situations, including ordering for himself at restaurants and talking on the telephone.

Not all children who stutter are at this severity level. If this speech disorder is not treated properly, it can reach this level, negatively impacting all areas of a child's life including home, school, social, and emotional.



What should I know about stuttering?

Some of us will never come into contact with children who stutter. It is a relatively rare speech disorder, affecting more school-age boys than girls. Many agree that stuttering is caused by a variety of factors, including genetics, motor programming, emotional, and environmental.

Listen to the speech of those around you. You'll notice that no one has perfect speech, free of all dysfluencies. The difference between their speech and the speech of the stuttering child is the amount of tension associated with the moment of stuttering. These are the common types of dysfluencies found in both normal and disordered speech:



- **Single Word Repetition** – Repeating a single word in a sentence. (I-I-I-I-I want to go now!)



- **Phrase Repetition** – Repeating a phrase within a sentence. (I want-I want-I want some more juice.)



- **Syllable Repetition** – Repeating a syllable within a word in a sentence. (I want to hold the ba-ba-ba-baby.)



- **Blocking** – Trying to get a syllable or sound out, but getting stuck, making no noise. [I love to eat ice (silence) cream.]



- **Prolongation** – Holding the first sound of a word or syllable, with difficulty moving to the next sound. (Tonight I have ho——mework.)

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I know a child who stutters. What can I do to help?

The best way to help a child who stutters is to work closely with his/her speech therapist. In therapy the child will be taught strategies to pull out of a stuttering situation, avoid a stuttering situation, and correct a stuttering situation. If these strategies are reinforced at home and school, then the child will usually begin to use them independently.

Some general ways to help a child who stutters are as follows:



- **Don't finish his/her sentences.** Children who stutter know what they want to say and generally don't like it when their sentences are completed for them. It elevates their stress levels, possibly increasing instances of stuttering.



- **Wait patiently for a child to finish.** Don't rush a child who stutters. Provide adequate wait time for him/her to complete the thought.



- **Watch your body language.** Children are very aware of your non-verbal reactions to their speech. Keep your face neutral, with an unchanged expression when the child stutters.



- **Educate others about the child's disorder.** Children in the class will be curious about the child's speech. Sometimes they will tease the child about his/her speech. If you teach them about the disorder in a fun, educational way, this may alleviate some of the discomfort.



- **Keep an open door.** Allow the child to come to you at any time to talk about school, family, or any other issues he/she might have.



- **Monitor the child's classroom achievement.** Some children who stutter begin to do poorly in the classroom setting. They may stop volunteering to answer questions or speak in front of the class. Make sure you notice any changes in the child's classroom performance and notify parents if changes occur.



Stuttering is a relatively rare, yet devastating, disorder of speech. It affects nearly every aspect of a child's life. Understanding a child who stutters is a step in the right direction. Working closely with the child's speech therapist will help both the parents and the teacher understand and work with the child who stutters.

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