

Stammering

What is stammering?

Approximately five per cent of all children will experience some difficulty with their fluency at some time during the development of their speech. Approximately 80% will achieve normal fluency, with or without some help.

Stammering may occur at any time during childhood but it usually starts between the ages of two and five years. (Andrews et al 1983). It is more common in boys than girls and commonly runs in families. Stammering has been defined as 'an abnormally high frequency or duration of stoppages in the forward flow of speech' (Guitar 1998). It is also referred to as 'stuttering' or 'dysfluency'.

What is it like?

One of the most frustrating features about stammering is its variability. The problem can fluctuate from mild to severe depending on the situation, the time of day or for some other unidentifiable reason. It is different for each person.

There are some features which are typically characteristic of stammering:

- Repetition of whole words, e.g. "and, and, and, then I left"
- Repetition of single sounds, e.g. "c-c-come h-h-here"
- Prolonging of sounds, e.g. "ssssssometimes I go out"
- Blocking of sounds, where the mouth is in position, but no sound comes out
- Facial tension - in the muscles around the eyes, nose, lips or neck
- Extra body movements may occur as the child attempts to 'push' the word out, such as stamping the feet, shifting body position or tapping with the fingers. These may also be referred to as 'concomitant movements'

- The breathing pattern may be disrupted, for example, the child may hold his breath while speaking or take an exaggerated breath before speaking
- Generally the flow of speech is interrupted and this may cause distress to the speaker and the listener

Sometimes a person may adopt strategies to try and minimise or hide the problem, for example:

- Avoiding or changing words - the child may say "I've forgotten what I was going to say", or may switch to another word when he begins to stammer, e.g. "I played with my br- br- br... my sister on Saturday".
- Avoiding certain situations - for instance, speaking in assembly or asking questions in class.

What causes it?

The cause of stammering remains unknown. Research to date suggests that children are born with a predisposition to stammering, perhaps inherited, and then other factors will influence when and how the stammer emerges and how it progresses. These factors are broadly divided into four categories: Physiological, Linguistic, Environmental and Emotional factors (Rustin, Botterill and Kelman 1996).

Physiological factors may include aspects such as family history, gender, rate of speech. Linguistic factors may include: language development, understanding and use of language and speech sound skills. Emotional factors may include: sensitivity, tendency to worry or set high standards. Environmental factors may include: competition for speaking turns, teasing at school, periods of difficulty or change.

Can it be treated?

There are a number of different approaches to therapy depending on the nature of the difficulty and the age of

the child. For younger children, therapy may be indirect (working with parents) or direct (encouraging the child to make changes to their own speech). For older children and adolescents therapy may include development of social skills (eye contact, turn taking, listening), the development of problem solving and negotiation skills, increasing confidence and improving self-esteem. Therapy also may involve identifying strategies to improve fluency, reducing the fear of stammering and finding ways to manage speaking situations more positively.

References

Rustin, Botterill and Kelman (1996) *Assessment and Therapy for Young Dysfluent Children: Family Interaction*. London. Whurr Publishers

Rustin, Cook, Botterill, Hughes and Kelman (2001) *Stammering: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Other Professionals*. London. David Fulton Publishers

Jackie Turnbull, Trudy Stewart (1996) *Helping Children Cope with Stammering*. Sheldon Press

Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.

Organisations which help

The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children

Finsbury Health Centre
Pine Street
London
EC1R 0LP
Tel: 020 7530 4238
www.stammeringcentre.org

British Stammering Association

15 Old Ford Road
London E2 9P
Tel: 020 8983 1003
www.stammering.org

Thanks goes to The Michael Palin Centre for providing the information contained in this glossary sheet



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