

General Stammering Advice

Stammering (or stuttering) does not develop uniformly with age or in the same way with different children. Most of the recommendations can be beneficial to all children so if it is possible to modify classroom policy this could reduce the risk of making an exception of the child who stammers. Liaison with a speech and language therapist is always recommended.

The older child

It may be quite clear, however, that a particular child has gone well beyond the early hesitant stage of normal dysfluency and is definitely stammering. The child may stammer with obvious physical tension or may try to conceal the severity of the problem by avoiding particular sounds, word or situations or by attempting to hide his mouth while speaking. If this is the case, make sure that teaching staff and parents have a discussion, so that you are using a consistent approach. If the child is attending speech therapy, then the therapist can guide you about a particular child's problem. There are no rules about participation in class activities so whenever possible discuss any specific problems with the child. In general, the aim is for the child to participate as fully as possible yet without feeling constant pressure from fear of stammering and ridicule.

Answering questions

- When asking the class questions try not to keep the child who stammers waiting too long for their turn since this may increase anxiety and hence stammering. Discuss with the child how to deal with free for all question and discussion sessions.
- Children who stammer may need more time to express their ideas, so during question and answer activities it is helpful if the teacher slows his or her own rate of speech so signalling to all the children that there is no need to hurry.

- Children can rely on stammering to cover up lack of knowledge and so should be encouraged to speak to their teacher when they don't understand or know something.
- Children often lose eye contact when stammering and it's helpful if teachers don't look away but give the same eye contact as they would if speaking to a child who is fluent.
- Finishing off sentences is usually unhelpful as it reduces self-confidence and increases frustration, especially if the person chooses words different from those intended by the stammering child.
- Where daily registration is causing problems alternative approaches can be discussed with the child.

Reading aloud

- When there are opportunities to read aloud in front of the class the child who stammers may wish to read in unison with another child as this will assist fluency.
- A classroom policy that encourages a relaxed reading pace may help the child who stammers as well as slow or hesitant readers.
- It may be necessary to work gradually towards reading in front of the class. Reading alone to the teachers or other adults can be followed by reading in small groups. When the child feels ready, reading to the class can be attempted.

Individual attention

- A child who stammers may find it very difficult to approach teachers either with concerns about work or to be sociable. If teachers can see the child on an individual basis now and again this may help to ease communication in these particular lessons.
- A child who stammers may find it very difficult to initiate conversations with adults and may be too embarrassed to discuss their stammer or problem with work. If teachers can see the child alone, now and again, this will provide opportunities to get to know the child and to sensitively discuss stammering, this may ease communication in their particular lessons.
- Failures with speaking can over-shadow all other achievements and lead to low self-esteem. The teacher's recognition of success or competence in other areas can be encouraged as well as directing the focus away from stammering.
- Perhaps the most important thing is that the child does not come to believe that stammering is unspeakably bad. Careful, sensitive discussion of the child's difficulties and strengths can do much to reduce the need to hide the stammering and paradoxically, this can lead to increased fluency. The harder children try to prevent stammering the more severe the stammering becomes. When they're not bothered about speaking the more fluent they're likely to be. There is a delicate balance between avoiding the pain of stammering and encouraging a child to take some risks with speaking. It is unlikely that fluency will be experienced without some risks. However, the child should be involved in deciding when to play safe and when to be more adventurous.

Teasing

One of the things that makes stammering so painful is that it occurs in social contexts. There is no way of keeping it to yourself. Many people who stammer feel ashamed of their speech and so can be very sensitive to teasing. Open discussion between teacher and child may encourage a more light hearted response to any teasing. It is best to deal with teasing about stammering not as an individual problem but rather include it in discussions and activities about teasing and bully in general.

If teasing can be dealt with before it occurs then this is always preferable to trying to deal with it after the child has suffered the humiliation of being victimised. A stammering child with few friends is more vulnerable to teasing. Anything that may help such a child make and keep friends is worth trying.

Speech and language therapy

The current emphasis in schools upon oral language and communication skills can be extra pressure on a child who stammers and so liaison with a speech and language therapist is recommended.