

Stammering – School age

Stammering (which is also known as stuttering) is when a child or young person repeats a sound or word (“r, r, red”), prolongs a sound (“mmmmummy”) or gets stuck and nothing comes out when they are trying to talk. There might also be signs of visible tension as the child or young person works hard to get the word out.

We don't know exactly what causes stammering but research shows that there are many factors that can influence a young person's fluency. About 5% of all children will stammer at some point, often between the ages of 2-5 years old when their speech and language skills increase rapidly and they begin using longer and more complicated sentences. Stammering can run in families so if there is a history of stammering in the family, a child may be more likely to stammer.

For the majority of children, stammering will resolve on its own in a few weeks or months but if the young person continues to stammer, they may benefit from support from a Speech and Language Therapist to put strategies in place to support them with their talking.

What can you do to help?

- Give the young person space and time to talk. If they get stuck in a moment of stammering do not interrupt them or finish the sentence for them, just give them time to finish what they want to say.
- Show them that you are interested in what they are saying not how they say it. It's important that young people realise from an early age that it's OK to stammer and it's not something they should try and hide.
- Maintain 'natural' eye contact when they have difficulty talking and try not to react with a change in your facial expression. Don't show you are anxious about how they are talking.
- Reduce the number of questions you ask the child/young person and create opportunities for them to talk without creating pressure around talking.
- Slow down the rate of your OWN talking. We naturally try to match our rate of speech to those around us. If you slow down, this shows the young person that it's OK to take their time and they are more likely to slow down themselves.
- Support and encourage the use of pausing and thinking time during class discussions, reading and presentations.
- Do not single them out – provide opportunities for the young person to offer their thoughts and views but do not create pressure around talking. Small group discussions are often easier than large group discussions to enable young people to offer their views/opinions.
- If completing reading practice in class, give the young person the option of when they would like to have their turn so that they don't have to wait for the anxiety to build knowing it is getting closer to their turn with each other young person reading first.



- Carefully consider the use of random name generators in lessons as these create a high level of anxiety for young people. Discuss this with the young person in advance to determine if they are happy for their name to be included.
- Class presentations – give the young person plenty of warning about any presentations they may be asked to do. Talk to them about how they feel about this and discuss any options that are available for them. If they are concerned about talking in front of others, discuss what would make it easier for them to participate rather than encouraging them to avoid the situation.
- Watch out for any teasing or bullying related to stammering and deal with this in a timely manner in line with your school's behaviour policy.
- Provide specific praise when the young person does something well – not just related to talking. Celebrate their successes and help them to recognise and value their strengths and talents.
- Look for opportunities to give the young person small responsibilities around the class/school to boost their confidence.
- For secondary age students: consider applying for extra time for oral exams as the anxiety of oral exams/presentations can often impact fluency. Extra time can be considered by the exam board when supported by a letter outlining the young person's need for this due to stammering. Discuss this with the young person at the time, to ensure they have plenty of warning of oral exams and can consider whether they would like to apply for extra time to reduce any anxiety around their talking.

Next steps

It can be difficult to tell which children are going to grow out of stammering on their own and those that will need more support. If the child or young person has been stammering for more than 6 months, if there is a family history of stammering or if the child is becoming very self-conscious or frustrated with talking then consider a referral to the Speech and Language Therapy Team.

Further information

- 'Wait wait I'm not finished yet' and 'My Stammering Tap' are short videos available on You Tube that feature young people who stammer talking about what they would like others to know about stammering.

Useful websites

- STAMMA – The UK Charity for people who stammer and their supporters:
www.stamma.org
- The Michael Palin Centre for stammering:
<https://michaelpalincentreforstammering.org/about-stammering/children/>

