

Sticky words

Understanding and helping children who stammer

Stammering can have a huge impact on children and their families. It is important that adults around them know how to help and encourage these children to be the best communicators they can. Raising awareness in nurseries and schools is an important place to start. **Karen Morgan** and **Gemma Clarke**, Specialist Speech and Language Therapists at the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children, explain what stammering is and what we can do to help.



“Mummy why can't I say it?” Sometimes really young children can be aware that talking is hard for them and benefit from reassurance from adults.

Stammering is a complex difficulty which typically begins between the ages of 2 and 5 years. It often coincides with the period of rapid growth in children's language skills and other physical developments. It is more commonly seen in boys and whilst many children grow out of stammering some may need specialist help.

- part word repetitions, where a sound or syllable is repeated, e.g. “c-can I have a drink?” or “some-some-sometimes I go play at Jack's house”;
- prolongations, where a sound is stretched, “e.g. I like ffffffffootball”;
- and
- blocks, where the mouth is in position but no sound comes out.

The type and amount of stammering varies between children and it can also vary from situation to situation. Parents often report that stammering is more noticeable when their child is tired, excited, unwell or upset.

What is stammering?

Stammering may typically include one or more of the following:

- whole word repetitions, e.g. “my-my-my-my teddy is new”;

Why do children stammer?

Importantly, we know that parents **do not** cause stammering. We also know that there are a number of factors which may make a child vulnerable to stammering.

Physical factors:

We know that stammering runs in families. There is also evidence that there are some differences in the wiring of the brain of people who stammer, which results in speech messages being interrupted.

Speech and language factors:

Parents sometimes tell us that “his brain is going faster than his mouth”. Either advanced language skills or difficulties with language can put pressure on a child's fluency. All children naturally take time to acquire the different speech sounds that we

use in language; sometimes this can make it harder for them to be fluent.

Environmental factors:

Some children who stammer find it difficult to manage the fast pace of life or sudden changes in their environment such as starting a nursery or school.

Emotional factors:

Whilst parents of children who stammer often comment that their child is sensitive, a worrier, a perfectionist, or easily gets upset, we must remember that these are common traits seen in all children. So while these factors do not cause stammering, a child who worries or is sensitive may react differently to a moment of stammering than a child who is laid back and not bothered by it.

“I’m amazed how much my son can say when I just give him a bit more time to speak and don’t finish his sentences.”

(Mother of M. (7 years) who has a stammer and history of language delay.)

Will he grow out of it?

Many children go through a period of stammering in the pre-school years. Research shows that the children who are less likely to grow out of stammering are male, who have a relative who stammers, whose fluency is not improving and who have been stammering for over a year. Additionally if the child or parents are anxious about the stammer it is important for them to access help.

Research shows that early intervention is effective; however children can access help for their talking and benefit from therapy at any age.

How to refer

Contact your local speech and language therapy service. Referral can be made by education staff or people working in the NHS (e.g. GPs and Health Visitors), and parents can self-refer if necessary.

What can nursery and primary staff do to help?

Watching a child struggle to talk can make adults feel helpless but there is plenty that we can do to help.

Talk with the child’s parents: Find out if they have noticed any stammering and if they are concerned about it. If you have a visiting speech and language therapist (SLT) who comes into nursery or school you can speak to them for advice and if appropriate you can refer the child for assessment with

the parents’ consent.

Talk to the child: When we see them struggling we can acknowledge that it was a tricky word and praise them for persevering – “Well done, that was hard but you managed to say what you wanted to say.”

Give the child time: When a child is stammering we often want to do something. It may be counterintuitive, but actually sometimes less is more. It will be helpful for the child if we take a step back and give them even more time to finish a sentence. More pauses and silences in play or conversation will give them the opportunity to think and plan what they want to say and to initiate interaction when they are ready. If we keep our rate of speech slow and model pauses and thinking time, this will make it easier for them to slow their own rate and therefore give themselves more time to talk. This is more effective than advising them to stop or slow down. Most children who stammer tell us they do not like people finishing their sentences for them.

Watch and listen to the child: Times when the child is more fluent will vary from child to child. It may be when they are talking to their peers or one to one with an adult. Perhaps it is in free play where they can choose what they want to say or at snack time where the language is more scripted and they do not have to generate their own sentences. If we know what these situations are we can try to create more of them so that the child experiences



King George VI, recently played by Colin Firth in the Oscar-winning film, The King’s Speech suffered with a stammer from an early age

even more fluency.

Observe the complexity of language the child is using. When we keep our language simple this encourages children to speak within the capacity of their developing language skills.

Keep building confidence: We can build a child’s confidence by commenting on what they are doing well and helping them to enjoy their successes in all areas of their day. We want to encourage children to be confident communicators even if talking is a struggle for them at times.

Help other kids be helpful too: Highlight the rules of turn-taking through fun verbal and non-verbal games, like passing objects around the group or taking turns during show and tell. Model and praise good turn-taking in the nursery. The child who stammers will then know that they do not have to fight for a turn to talk. Knowing that they will have time and will not be interrupted when it is their turn means they do not have to rush their words.

Keep an eye out for teasing or for the child being excluded from games. It may be helpful for an adult to facilitate play in a pair or small group to ensure that the child gets their turn to talk. Talk about differences and being kind in circle time.

Nursery and school staff are important figures in children’s early development. They play a key role in helping every child to become a confident communicator. Children who stammer do not need treatment that is vastly different from other children in the classroom, just maybe a little bit more of what you are already doing, such as giving them a bit more time to talk, a little bit more praise and an environment that encourages inclusion. ■

References and Resources

“Wait wait I’m not finished yet” free DVD and resources available online from: http://www.stammeringcentre.org/guides_home

Michael Palin Centre website: <http://www.stammeringcentre.org>
British Stammering Association: www.stammering.org



Michael Palin with some of the children on one of the Centre’s intensive courses late last year