Stammering

Advice for staff in the pre-school setting

Early Intervention in the pre-school years can lead to a complete recovery from stammering.

How staff may identify a child who stammers in the pre-school setting

The Early Years Foundation Curriculum emphasises the speaking and listening skills of all children so staff will be observing and recording all the children's speech development. It is important to notice if a child is stammering. It is quite common for young children to stammer as they are learning language skills but even so staff should advise the parent that a speech and language therapist should be contacted for advice. Only a professional can identify whether the child's speech shows the common developmental dysfluency of the young child, or is a stammer that requires intervention.

When a child is stammering staff should never advise the parent to 'Wait and see'. A referral to a speech and language therapist should be made. Early Intervention in the pre-school years gives the best chance of complete recovery from stammering.

Stammering does vary with the individual child, but some common features are:

- Repetition of whole words, e.g. 'when, when, when, are we playing?'
- Repetition of single sounds or parts of words, e.g. 'g-g-go away!' or 'mu-mu-mu-mummy'
- Stretching sounds in a word, e.g. 'I like that s-s-story.'
- Blocking of sounds, when the child's mouth appears ready to speak but no sound emerges for several seconds, e.g. '----I got a book.'
- Stopping speaking half way through a sentence.
- Tension signs in the face, e.g. around the eyes, lips, neck or nose.
- An extra body movement as the child try to push out the word: e.g. stamping the feet, tapping with hands or changing position.
- Breathing might sound affected e.g. the child might hold his breath while speaking.

Variability

Stammering can come and go and this may be confusing for pre-school staff who is trying to observe a child's speaking. It can change even within the same conversation and can fluctuate from mild to severe depending on the situation. It may range from part and whole word repetitions a few times a day for one child, to blocking for 3-4 seconds, accompanied by gestures like foot stamping, with facial contortions on nearly every other word, for another.

When does it begin?

The commonest time is between two and five years when the child's language development is at its peak. It can emerge gradually, but it may also begin very suddenly.

Learning to talk is a complex process and one in five pre-school children (20%) will have some problems with their fluency at some time when their speech is developing.

Recovery from stammering

Pre-school staff should talk with the parent when a young child is stammering and recommend that a speech and language therapist is contacted as soon as possible for further advice.

Some children will recover without help and many will recover with help. Girls and boys are equally affected, but girls are likely to start stammering a little earlier and are more likely to overcome the problem than boys. It is reassuring that the likelihood of recovery is not related to the severity of the
stammering, as children who stammer severely can recover naturally within a few months. By the age of ten boys who stammer outnumber girls by four to one. One per cent of children will continue to stammer into adulthood.

Children who stammer have the same range of ability and personality traits as those who do not stammer. They are not initially more anxious than children who do not stammer but anxiety can develop if the child starts to worry about his speaking. Sometimes a young child who stammers may express frustration in behaviour or gestures.

What causes stammering?

There is a major difference between the beginning stammering found in a young child and the confirmed condition in older children and adults.

Stammering in young children is largely a temporary speech difficulty as it can be overcome with modern approaches to therapy. Therapists like to see children who stammer as young as possible, even if there is no need for immediate help and recovery occurs naturally.

The underlying causes of stammering are not known. It occurs in every language and culture throughout the world at 1% of the adult population. There is thought to be a family link in some cases, as where a close adult relative is stammering a young child is more likely to stammer. However this does not always happen. Recent research focuses on the workings of the brain and the neurological basis of stammering. It has been suggested that it may be connected with how the child’s developing neural circuits in the brain are being wired. The details of the latest research can be viewed on the BSA web site, www.stammering.org

While the underlying causes of stammering are not known what is certain is that stammering is caused by a complex combination of environmental, inherited, linguistic and physical factors that are unique to the individual in their form and effects.