

Words in this resource

Stammer

The word 'stammer' is used as it is more commonly recognised in the UK while 'stutter' is more usual in other English speaking countries.

As by school age more boys than girls stammer, for convenience the pronoun '*he*' is used in the text.

Dysfluency

This term is sometimes used as an alternative to stammering.

Early Intervention

Means to contact a speech and language therapist as soon as possible, when you notice that your young child is stammering.

Speech and Language Therapist

A speech and language therapist is a registered professional working usually in the National Health Service, but sometimes in private practice. Occasionally the text will refer to these professionals as therapists.

British Stammering Association

This will be called the BSA in the text.

Is my child stammering?

Trust your own judgement

Always contact a speech and language therapist, who ideally specialises in stammering, when you think that your child is stammering, or ask the school to do so. Most services accept referrals directly from parents. The [BSA](http://www.stammering.org/) can supply contact details of your local service.

Stammering can take many different forms as a child gets older and every child who stammers will do so in his own way. Some of these characteristics are likely to be found in the speech of a primary school child who stammers

Repetition of whole words, e.g. 'when, when, when is playtime?'

Repetition of single sounds or parts of words, e.g. 'g-g-go away!' 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.

You may find that as your child gets older he begins to become more self-conscious about his speech difficulty. He may develop his own tricks for getting out the words: an extra body movement as he tries to push out the word: for example, stamping his feet, tapping with hands or changing position.

Sometimes a primary school child is aware that his speech is different from the others in his class but he may not necessarily be concerned about it if he is still quite young. As he gets older, he is more likely to be anxious about talking and may try to get out of situations where he has to speak.

Variability

Stammering can come and go and this may be confusing for the child as well as parents and teachers who are trying to notice his 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 at least one in twenty pre-school children (5%) will have some problems with their fluency at some time when their speech is developing. It has been suggested by one researcher that it can affect as many as one in 8 pre-school children (12%), so it may be more common.

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Recovery from stammering

This is most likely to occur at the pre-school age, but all children are different and some may recover later than that. Other children may continue to stammer and will need support for their speech. A speech and language therapist should always be consulted for advice and the class teacher provided with information from the [BSA](#). Most therapists are able to work with the teacher to support the child.

With support a child can maintain his confidence and manage his speech.

Parents do not cause stammering but worrying about your child's speech can make you feel anxious. If you contact the [BSA:Helpline](#) you can talk about your fears with someone who understands.

What causes stammering?

Stammering occurs in every language and culture throughout the world at 1% of the adult population. People who stammer have the same range of personality and intellectual traits as those who do not, although there are suggestions in the research that they may be more sensitive than is the norm.

Current research is clear that the cause of stammering has a physiological basis in the brain structure. [BSA:Research](#) has the details of all the latest research and information. There is no single or definite cure and there is no single best strategy for supporting children as they all have individual needs. Parents cannot cause stammering but 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. While the underlying cause of stammering is now understood what is also certain is that stammering speech is also affected by a complex combination of environmental, inherited, linguistic and physical factors that are unique to the individual in their form and effects.

Stammering can emerge at any childhood stage, but most commonly between the ages of two and five when about one in twenty children may stammer. This of course coincides with a period of the rapid development of language skills. At first it affects twice as many boys as girls. Later, as more girls than boys recover, boys who stammer outnumber girls by as much as 5 to 1. It can emerge gradually, but sometimes develops very suddenly. **Early Intervention at this age gives the best**

chance of recovery.

In older children and adults the confirmed condition usually has developed to become more than just a speech difficulty. Feelings and emotions about the stammer and about themselves as people usually become an integral part of the condition and it is essential that support for the management of the stammering is provided. For children small modifications in the speaking and listening environment at home and in school, which make the child feel supported, can lower anxiety levels, and may help with fluency.

Parents do not cause stammering, and with Early Intervention there is an excellent chance of recovery at the pre-school stage with some children recovering as late as 7 or 8 years old.

Parents do not cause stammering

Years ago it was thought that parents' behaviour caused the child to stammer. Now research proves that parents do not cause stammering and that this old fashioned view was wrong, although it may still be held by some uninformed people and cause parents considerable distress. **However, we do know that parents play a vital role in helping their child by managing the speaking and listening environment in order to reduce the impact of the stammer.**

What parents need to know about their child who stammers

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Is my child anxious?

Children do not start stammering because they are more anxious and nervous than other children. They have the same spread of personality traits as children who do not stammer. However, fear of stammering can cause the child to worry and be anxious and that is why some people, even professionals, still wrongly believe that anxiety caused the stammering in the first place. However, there is a suggestion that children who stammer might have a tendency to be more sensitive generally than children who do not stammer.

Does intelligence have anything to do with stammering?

Children who stammer have the same spread of intelligence as the rest of the population unless the stammer is associated with other more complex needs, such as Down's syndrome. However, one study has found that non-verbal intelligence, while still within normal limits, was slightly lower among children who stammer than among a matched control group. This means that they might be slower at picking up the signals in the listener's body language than other children and parents need to be aware of this so that they can encourage their child's development of social skills.

Some children also may also find the teaching of reading through a phonics system alone more difficult as it involves on the spot repeating of letter sounds by the child in front of other children. A teacher should be aware that using visual methods as well could be helpful.

Does my child worry about his stammering?

This possibility is very distressing for parents to consider, as they naturally want their child to be happy. They may tend to project their own feelings about the stammer and believe that the child feels as

worried as they do. However, this is not always the case when a child is quite young. If parents watch their child's behaviour they may see that in many situations he is not really concerned about the stammer and seems unaware that his speech is different to any one else's. When this is the case, parents and teachers should accept the child's speech without comment.

When will my child start to be concerned about his speech?

Nobody can provide a definite answer to this question that applies to every child as children develop at different speeds and are totally individual in their attitude to their speech. As children progress at primary school, parents may find that their child becomes more obviously aware of his stammering speech but is not showing any anxiety about it. It is important to maintain his relaxed attitude by not commenting on his speech unless he shows anxiety in his behaviour with a gesture or shrug for example, or even in a comment. Some younger children may forget how frustrated they felt about their speaking and will not worry about speaking next time.

However children do vary in their feelings about their speech and there is some evidence that those as young as four may be self-conscious about their stammering and even quite worried by it, while others who are considerably older may not show any anxiety at all, even if they are aware that their speech is different. Parents of some quite young children who go to primary school have told the BSA that the teacher has noticed that their child is not joining in talking sessions, which they believe to be connected with a fear of stammering. This sort of behaviour may indicate that a young child is already worried about speaking and parents need to be aware of this.

Certainly, as the child gets older it is much more likely that he will worry about his speaking and will need support from a therapist, his teacher and parents to manage this feeling of fear about his talking.

When you see that your child is struggling to speak, or reacting to his stammering by making a comment, or a gesture: '*Do not ignore his distress.*' Give him support, as you would for any ordinary difficulty like a fall, and comment gently, 'Well done, that was a hard word for you.' A hug or an age appropriate sympathetic gesture might also be a good idea.

What do I tell him if I stammer?

Don't worry about your child hearing you stammer, as children do not copy stammering from another person in the long term. If you stammer it is important that you appear confident and relaxed when you are speaking. Your child can see that you are comfortable with your talking both with him and other adults and children. This will help him in turn to feel confident about talking regardless of whether he is stammering. You will also be better able to understand and support him when he wants to talk about his speech.

Outdated myths about stammering that parents might hear

Can you catch it?

Occasionally parents have worried that their child caught stammering from another child whom he has heard stammering, or has copied it from another child. There is no evidence that this can happen.

Can being left-handed cause stammering?

When it was common years ago to make children who naturally used their left hand to use their right, there was a theory that this caused stammering. There is absolutely no evidence that this is the case. However, the incidence of left-handedness among children who stammer is significantly higher than among children who do not. Around 1 in 4 of children who stammer are left-handed, compared to 1 in 9/10 of the general population.

Your child will grow out of it!

This is a very worrying myth as parents do report being told to ignore the stammer by other people and even by professionals. It is true in some cases that the stammer does go away but only a speech and language therapist can assess whether your child's stammer is likely to do this or will need intervention. Parents often feel instinctively that they should seek advice about their child's stammering and being told to ignore it by other people is very unhelpful, as a parent is right to want further advice.

Summary

If you think your child is stammering you should always contact a speech and language therapist who ideally specialises in stammering. Many services are able to work with the teacher as well as the parent so that the child feels supported in the classroom. Most services accept referrals directly from parents.

The [BSA](#) can supply the contact details of your local service.

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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. It can appear to have started at later ages but this is not common.

In the Early Years many children stammer and most will have recovered with or without help by the time they start primary school. However a minority of children will continue to have difficulties even if they have had help and parents understandably worry that their child's school life will be affected by his stammering. Very occasionally for some reason the child's stammering may be identified for the first time at primary school.

Recovery from stammering

This is most likely to occur at the pre-school age, but all children are different and some go on to stammer for much longer than that. A speech and language therapist should always be consulted for advice and the class teacher provided with information from [BSA-schoolchildren](#). Most therapists are able to work with the teacher to support the child. With support a child can maintain his confidence and manage his speech.

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