

## Learn about stammering

The main aim must be to take the mystery out of stammering by getting information about this complex speech difficulty from the [BSA](#) and this resource [Does my primary school child stammer?](#) When parents have this reliable information about stammering they become more confident about helping their child.

[How can speech therapy help my child](#)

**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](#) can supply contact details of your local service.**

Therapy is always helpful for any child whose stammer is causing him problems. While Early Intervention gives the best chance of recovery, such is the unpredictable nature of stammering that less commonly recovery has been known to take place at an older age. Even if fluency is never achieved, parents should continue to take advice from a therapist and the [BSA](#), as modern approaches can help the child to maintain his confidence and self-esteem, even though he is continuing to stammer.

### Talk to your child's teacher

It is very important that every member of staff who works with your child has up-to-date information about stammering and knows the simple strategies that are helpful in supporting his speech. You can pass on to the school [What school staff need to know to help your child](#). Staff should also be willing and able to work in partnership with your child's therapist who is likely to contact the school.

Remember that teachers are responsible for your child's teaching and learning and must respond to the individual needs of all children. There is considerable support for your child in school from [support for learning](#) through the [Special Educational Needs Code of Practice](#).

**As long as a child is supported at home and school, with advice from a therapist as needed, then he can achieve to the level of his potential. Stammering need not hold him back and there are many examples of successful achievers in all walks of life to prove that [stammering need not hold you back](#).**

## Understand what factors will affect your child's fluency?

Children do vary and their stammer will be differently affected by the situation. However these are some of the common factors that may contribute to your child's stammering. When you know what these can be you can respond to how he is at the time and take the pressure off him for example by changing his timetable, and/or reducing the demands on him to talk.

### His feelings

- If he is tired, unwell, worried, frightened or even excited for a happy reason such as a birthday.

### The situation

#### The classroom or other group situations

- A situation where the adults and other children are talking quickly and turn to him for a reply.
- An atmosphere that seems noisy and rushed and many people are talking at once and he is expected to join in.
- He has been put on the spot to answer a question or tell a story about an event and is very aware that other children and adults are listening.
- He is talking to an adult who is distracted and is looking away, for example when the teacher is

obviously planning another task.

- He is trying to explain something very complicated and is struggling with new or unfamiliar words.
- He is trying to describe an event that has upset him, or he needs to explain that he wants to do something urgently, such as go to the toilet.
- When he is expected to talk when asked and everybody will be listening to him. This can be a particular problem if he is expected to give his name, such as at registration.

## **Other activities**

- A place that he does not know very well, if at all, and is expected to talk to strangers, such as in a shop or at the doctor's surgery. In these circumstances he is particularly likely to stammer when he tries to give information such as saying his name.
- Social and family activities when everyone is trying to talk at once.
- When taking part in Sports he is asked his opinions about his performance in the changing rooms as the coach goes round talking to all the team. It is particularly difficult when the team are lined up together as commonly happens and quick replies are called for.

Once you understand what situations may be affecting your child's speech you can try to reduce the pressures on him at home in speaking situations, and have some information to pass on to his teacher and his therapist.

## **What can parents do to help?**

### **Give him the chance to talk about any worries he may have about his speech**

As children get older they are more likely to be concerned about their speech. If you can tell that your child is worried about his speech take the opportunity to gently raise the subject with him. Let it go and try another time if he does not seem ready to talk about it yet. When you think that he is ready to talk about it give him the chance to tell you about his worries and listen as he explains, even if it seems to take some time.

Talking openly with him about his speech problems, at the pace that he sets, helps him to see stammering as something that he does now and again, which does not change him as a person in any way. It prevents a feeling of shame building up and the feeling that nobody can really help him. If he is interested you could show him the [BSA](#) information so that he understands that there is help and information available so that even if he continues to stammer, with support he can still achieve at school and get on well with people.

Show him that his stammer does not affect your feelings for him and that he is still seen as the same interesting and important person. Build up his confidence by praising all his achievements and share with him your own experiences of being worried about something as a child so he does not feel that you cannot understand. Encourage him to tell you if anything happens at school or at home that causes him to be upset about his speech, and plan with him ways that he can deal with this himself or have you take the initiative by approaching the person concerned to explain about stammering and its effects.

### **Contact your local speech and language therapy service**

Parents should contact their local speech and language therapy service as soon as possible after they notice the stammering, even if the stammer appears to be quite mild and does not trouble the child in any way. Most services can be approached directly by parents without contacting a GP or health visitor. If parents agree the school may make the referral. The [BSA](#) can provide the contact details of your local NHS service, or of the web site for private therapist should you choose to enquire there.

### **Talk to your child's teacher**

It is very important that every member of staff who works with your child has up-to-date information

about stammering and knows the simple strategies that are helpful in supporting his speech from [What primary school staff need to know to help your child](#). Staff should also be willing and able to work in partnership with your child's therapist who is likely to contact the school.

Remember that teachers are responsible for your child's teaching and learning and must respond to the individual needs of all children. There is considerable support for your child in school from support for learning through the [Special Educational Needs Code of Practice](#).

## Simple tips to help your child

If you are waiting for your child to see a speech and language therapist, there are some ways you can help him with his talking. You may find some of them easy, others will need practice. If for some reason a therapist is not available or you are not able to take him to see one, these ideas will help you to support your child's speaking and will not make his stammering worse.

### Remember the simple tips

Give him time to finish and do not interrupt or finish off words.

**Do not comment on his speech unless you notice that he 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 other appropriate sympathetic gesture might also be a good idea.

Listen attentively and repeat back some part of what he said so that the child feels that what he said is more important than how he said it.

Maintain normal eye contact and do not show any impatience. For example, avoid frequently nodding; looking at a watch or surreptitiously getting on with another task while the child is speaking.

Slow your own speech with natural pauses, demonstrating that there is no need to rush.

Talk, play and/or socialise regularly with your child in a relaxed environment where you follow his lead as to what he wants to do.

Aim to build his self-esteem by emphasising what he does well and using his name or family nickname regularly when you talk with him so he knows that he is unique and special to you. He is more likely then to develop the confidence to manage his speaking even when stammering severely.

**Talk** with him on a daily basis one to one for at least fifteen minutes in a relaxed and quiet atmosphere with nothing else happening to distract him such as the television, or loud background noise. When he is younger you may find that he is most comfortable sitting down in a special place that he likes, with a favourite toy/ game, with you sitting at the same level.

### The older child

As he gets older, and is less inclined to sit down with a parent, integrate talking into daily activities such as mealtimes, bedtimes and family leisure occasions. Even if it is an effort when a parent is tired it is worth doing that to communicate regularly with your child by talking and listening to what he has to say. Then you can be reassured that if he has a worry about his speech or anything else such as [teasing and](#)

bullying that you will be the first to know.

## **Spending quality time with your child**

Spend time together regularly - follow his lead when he is younger by playing with what he wants to play with and talking about what he wants to talk about. As he gets older involve yourself in his activities, for example television viewing, playing games on a computer or outdoors and use the opportunities to talk. This sense of being in charge particularly if he has more skill than you helps to build his self-esteem and causes him to think a little about what he is doing, especially if he feels that he has a superior skill that he can explain to you. During this time, encourage him by praising him for what he is good at (e.g.: 'That was a great goal' or 'Thanks for showing me how to play that').

Make the family routine relaxed rather than rushed.

## **A home environment that is calm and relaxed**

This is a difficult ideal to attain nowadays as there are so many stresses on families. However, a home environment that feels tranquil and relaxed to a child of any age will be helpful to speech management and build confidence. If he has been at school for example, you may want to immediately ask about his day particularly if something important like a test was taking place. However, he will have been stimulated and possibly stressed during that day by school work and social contacts and may just need a comforting environment with you where no demands are made on him. You could just sit quietly nearby as he relaxes, responding when he talks to you. Let him choose the moment for talking about how he had got on, even if it is much later on.

### Helping your child to help himself

As he gets older and widens his social contacts it is important to ensure that he is not rushing around all the time between different activities; if possible a good balance between stimulus and calm needs to be maintained. Activities that help him to concentrate while being methodical and 'slowing him down' can all contribute to that: learning to swim, play a musical instrument, have lessons in football and so forth. Perhaps also the popular Sports of the East such as Tai chi may be fun and encourage relaxation and concentration. The idea is to 'slow down' a child and help him to keep calm. The BSA hears from many parents that their primary child, particularly if he is a boy, can be 'dashing around all the time' and that this seems to affect their concentration and their fluency.

## **How the family can help**

### Remember the simple tips

#### **Happy talking**

Build talking together into all your routines as appropriate to his age: out walking, at mealtimes, when watching television, at bath times and bed times, for example. Make conversation part of the pattern of family life. This will build up your child's confidence in talking because he is learning that his talking is valued even when he is stammering.

#### **Speaking and listening in the family**

Children who stammer can be very sensitive to the speaking and attitudes of other family members. They may feel harassed by a fast pace of talking by sisters and brothers particularly if they find it hard to keep up, or are being continually interrupted, as they struggle to have their say. It is good for all the children in the family, as well as the child who stammers, to take their turns in speaking and to allow others to have their say without interrupting. These skills are important for learning.

In any family, children may make upsetting comments about another child in the family behind the

parents' back and it is important to find out if this is going on. The secretive undermining of one child by other children in the family is quite common. Parents need to be aware of this and act to prevent it.

## **Key adults**

Use the [BSA](#) leaflets so that all key adults and children in your child's remember the simple tips to support your child's speech. Sometimes older people may take some convincing that they should not interrupt or finish off words when a child is stammering. When this happens pass on the BSA leaflets as they provide straightforward information from outside the family that is well presented and up-to-date.

## **Support for you**

If you do feel very anxious about your child's stammering, then contact the [BSA:Helpline](#) so that you can talk about your fears with someone who understands.

## **Helping your child to help himself**

### **Helping your child to be more open about his stammering**

If he is continuing to stammer at primary school there will come a time when he will be able to engage in different ways of helping himself to cope with his speech. The age at which you can judge that he is able to do this will be set by him, as when he is relaxed about talking to you about his speech he is likely to begin thinking about what is happening when he talks. If he is receiving therapy then he will get considerable help with dealing with issues of openness, but parents can also help him to feel better able to cope.

The key is to be ready to talk if he needs to about any problems he is meeting at school or with friends and encourage ideas he may have that are sensible ways of dealing with them. School problems must quickly be raised with his teacher and the school should have good strategies in place to help but you may need to initiate a chat about stammering with other adults or children he comes into contact with. Occasionally, with your help, and that of his therapist if one is involved, he may feel that he can approach someone himself. The BSA knows of primary school children who actually have had the confidence to mention their stammer to an adult, or other children, and give them a [BSA](#) leaflet or one provided by a therapist. In a couple of instances children have been helped by parents/teachers/therapists to prepare their own personal leaflet, which really does make the point well.

### **When your child will not talk about his stammer**

**If this happens and your child appears quite relaxed about his speech and does not seem to be having any problems communicating at school or with friends and family, then there is no need to worry if he does not want to talk about his stammer.**

However, a minority of children as they grow older may not want to talk about their speech because they find it so worrying. These worries may be growing inside them and only come out in their behaviour. Girls are more likely to become withdrawn and boys to act out their frustrations in silliness or worse. If you feel that your child may be reaching this stage it is vital to talk again with the teacher and a speech and language therapist. These professionals may now consider that more help is required from another outside agency, such as an educational psychologist, so that an assessment is made for more support for learning through the [Special Educational Needs Code of Practice](#).

### **Teaching your child to deal with stress**

We know that a child who stammers is likely to stammer more when he feels stressed and anxious. He should be encouraged when he is old enough to be playing out of your sight in the house to have 'time out' when he is quiet and relaxed. This quiet time after periods of stressful activity: rushing around between activities, hard work at school and so forth can have a calming effect. There should be a

special place for this; perhaps a corner of his bedroom where he has a few books, quiet toys or activities, such as drawing, that calm and relax him. When he is having a quiet session in this place, you should make sure that he is not stimulated by anything that makes any demands on him, such as games or television.

It is thought that children who follow this practice are quietening themselves down and that they do learn to self-monitor their own need for this little temporary escape from pressure and can actually learn to choose to impose some quiet time on themselves. Parents can help by modelling a little of this relaxation themselves, reading quietly for instance and encouraging their child to sit quietly near you and do something similar.

## **Mindfulness**

Most of allow our minds to become clogged up with racing thoughts even when we are occupied on a task. Even young children can do this and if they stammer that adds to the demands on them. Encourage your child to focus on a task or an experience as much as he can so that he is not doing many things at once. When out walking for instance enjoy some aspect of the scenery at a very particular level: study a leaf for example and get your child to really look at it and observe it, thinking of words with you that describe it. This all helps to slow him down and appreciate experiences. Therapists working with older children may introduce these concepts.

## **Exercise**

Children who are busy most of the time, and boys in particular who may seem to be never still, often benefit from putting that energy into Sports musical activities, and other exercise that takes up energy and/or helps them to relax. Swimming, Tai chi and yoga are both good aids to relaxation and Wii exercise programmes can be easily done in the home and are great fun for the whole family. If you think that your child seems to be stressed and over active at any time try some quick fun exercises with him, 'jumping jacks' apparently have been found to quickly use up energy and calm down a child who seems wound up.

## **School programmes**

At school, there will be programmes that aim to make your child more health and well-being conscious. In many schools now the concept is established of children taking time out in a quiet area, when they feel stressed. If your child is getting that kind of understanding at home as well he will feel supported in every way. He will learn to improve his own self-monitoring skills so that he can take steps to lower his levels of stress when he feels that he needs to.

All these approaches will make it easier for your child to manage his speech even when he is stammering and give him the confidence to take part and achieve his potential.

## **How to prepare your child for speaking and listening activities in school**

### **Help to develop your child's confidence and skill in speaking and listening**

We know that when children start at primary school it is very helpful if they are used to talking in one to one or group situations. Pre-schools work hard to develop these skills and you can help at home by setting these standards for speaking and listening so that he is used to what the school will require from him.

### **Teach him to value speaking and listening**

Talk regularly with your child and always try to be near enough to him to establish normal eye contact. Insist that if he wants to talk with you, he stops what he is doing and comes over to speak to you. It is best to avoid shouting across the room, or through the house, unless absolutely necessary, so that he

learns that speaking and listening are important events and understands that he needs to concentrate when doing so. By concentrating on his talking, the demands on him will be lowered and he should feel more relaxed. He might also talk more fluently, or at least talk without being upset by his stammering.

Help your child feel good about himself and his talking. Always listen attentively and keep normal eye contact and expect him to show he is listening by looking at you. Compliment him when he has explained something to you. 'Well, that was interesting.' Use his name or family nickname frequently to reinforce his sense of identity as someone who is special to you. Keep normal eye contact as you speak.

### **Show him that it is what he says that is important not how he says it**

If your child makes a mistake with a word when talking do not criticise him, just repeat the word, as it should be said in your comment back to him, so he hears the correct version. When it is his turn to speak, give him time to finish what he is saying without interrupting. Do not finish off words or sentences for him.

Slowing down your own speech when you talk to your child will make it easier for him to follow what you are saying and help him feel less rushed. This can be more helpful than telling a child to slow down, start again or take a deep breath.

Concentrate on what your child is saying, rather than how he says it. This helps you to avoid common reactions like tensing when your child stammers, or even looking away for a split second. If your child senses that you feel worried about his speech he may start to feel that he has something wrong with him and begin to worry about speaking situations. Even very young children can react in this way so the stammer might become more pronounced, or in some instances the child might try to avoid talking.

If he seems tense and shows signs of distress as he struggles to speak just react calmly to the difficulty as you might with any other child with a comment that acknowledges his efforts and yet does not appear to him to show you are worried about his speech. 'That was a bit hard for you, you did really well there', acknowledges and compliments him at the same time. With all children a hug or another age appropriate gesture might add to the reassurance.

### **Teach him the importance of body language in communication**

We know that the listener notices this, just as much, if not more than the content of the speaking. You will be doing your child a great favour if you encourage him to show interest when he is listening with good normal eye contact, as we know that a stammer often causes people to avoid looking at the listener as they talk. As your child gets older if he always looks away when he is talking and/or listening it can give the wrong impression. At a younger age he can be helped to overcome that tendency.

### **Turn-taking**

Encourage all family members to respect each other's speaking, taking their turn to speak and avoiding the interruption of other speakers. This is important; especially if a child is stammering, as his right to have his say must be supported, so that his confidence is not undermined. A child who knows his talking is appreciated will feel more positively about his speech and be better equipped to cope with school oral work.

### **Using visual materials to help him cope with change**

All children can worry about new experiences but we do know that children who stammer may be more sensitive than the norm. They are more likely to become anxious about changes in their lives to a worrying degree for a parent. While it is helpful to talk about these events such as changing schools and give reassurance, sometimes a child might be helped by drawing pictures of important moments in an event as he sees them. There is considerable evidence for example that children are helped when they are going through a stressful time, such as starting a new school, if they have made a visual timetable of

what is happening in a day and interested parents can view this approach at [Talking Point](#).

## Key family members

These should all follow your lead in supporting your child as the [BSA](#) recommends.

## Summary

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