

Advice for the SENCO in the primary school: to use for staff training on differential oral strategies to support a child who stammers

Staff should always work in partnership with the speech and language therapist, but these suggestions have been found to be helpful.

Don't feel under pressure to say the word for the child

Younger children who stammer are not always aware that their speech is different in any way and may talk as they wish without any sign of stress. Sometimes it can be upsetting for the adult to listen and watch while a child struggles to get out a word, but he could be quite happy to carry on until he has finished talking. The adult may want to finish off the word as it is clear what he is trying to say. As long as the child is not upset by the struggle it is best to let him finish in his own good time. The adult should keep normal eye contact while the child is speaking. When the child seems quite relaxed about his stammering staff should just accept his speech without commenting, while observing to check if there are any signs of worry or anxiety.

When the child is struggling to speak and appears upset

Sometimes a child who is struggling to speak may show frustration in gestures, facial expressions or even might graphically describe his speech as hard or bumpy. When it is clear that he is upset by what is happening to him as he struggles to speak, it is helpful to acknowledge his difficulties and make a reassuring comment, 'You did well to say that word'. If the child gives up trying to explain then you could offer help, 'Did you want to look at this book?' Occasionally, there might be a change in behaviour when the stammer causes worry as can sometimes happen even with a young child. You should be aware of such changes and respond by talking quietly and simply with him in a calm, one-to-one situation to give him support and gently discover what is worrying him. **When a child is obviously worrying about his stammer, staff should set time aside for regular one-to-one chats with him.**

Help the child to feel that there is no rush to finish speaking

Talking quickly gives a child less time to think about what he is going to say: to choose the right words, and make the right speech sounds so that he can be understood. Most people understand that and often will reply when a child is stammering by telling him to 'Slow Down', 'Take your time' or similar. However, that is not a good way to get the child to slow his speech. It is hard for him to do that while he is speaking, particularly if he is excited and wants to have his say at that time, such as in answering a question or competing with other speakers to talk. It is much better to **model pausing and slowing in your own speech** so that he is more likely to reply in a calm unhurried way, copying your pace of speech.

Pausing

A helpful way to give the impression that there is no hurry to speak is to pause before you start to talk so that you model for the child an opportunity to organise thoughts into words. As a child is developing language he will benefit from having extra space and time to think and plan. This option of thinking time before you speak is a good topic to discuss with children using techniques like 'Circle Time'. This will benefit the whole group by allowing the children to consider the best ways to communicate their ideas.

Slowing down your own speech

This is quite difficult to do at a pace that is slower than normal speech but not so slow as to appear silly. Practice is often needed to get the pace of speech at the right level. Such slower speaking and pausing can actually benefit the whole group of children and there is evidence that when the teacher adapts this practice when talking the quality of all the children's answers improves, as they feel comfortable about taking their time to think and speak.

Non-verbal cues

Sometimes when an adult is using slower speech, body language does not mirror that relaxed approach and even a young child can pick that up. It is helpful to ask yourself whether you are doing anything that sends the wrong signals, such as frequently nodding, glancing at a clock, fidgeting and so forth.

Organisation

It is important to ensure that there is always time to use these approaches by making sure that routines and timetables are followed without last minute panics to go for lunch or breaks. These can curtail a conversation suddenly and undermine the confidence in talking of the child who stammers, and probably other children as well. Also, in these circumstances, the child may feel anxious about making changes quickly and this could exacerbate his stammering.

Using simple language

Primary children are learning vocabulary and language structures all the time and stammering tends to occur on longer, more complex sentences when the child is trying to use a higher level vocabulary in a difficult sentence, rather than in a simple one with common familiar words. It is not desirable to hinder the child's learning of language but it is important to balance that with the level of demands on his fluency. A speech and language therapist can help staff to determine the appropriate level of language to help the child not to overstretch his capacity to be fluent in a conversation.

Keeping your own language and sentence construction simple

When adults, even professionals, talk to young children, they may use complex language and sentence structures without really appreciating that they have done so. This causes confusion and can account for some of the times when children appear to have disobeyed instructions. Most young children find it easier to talk about the here and now, actual things which are happening at that time, than about ideas or events in the past or the future.

A child who stammers may be fluent when talking as he plays with toys but then stammer when talking about a recent trip. At first it is helpful if an adult keeps to concrete topics when talking with a dysfluent child. Once the child appears more confident in talking and appears to be managing his stammer, more linguistic demands should be introduced in a step-by-step approach, so that his language skills are developed, while demands on his fluency are not excessive. The speech and language therapist should be able to offer advice on when it is appropriate to offer these more challenging words and structures.

Modelling shorter simple sentences

The adult can model shorter sentences with familiar vocabulary, instead of talking in complex sentences with high-level vocabulary.

Helpful model

It is best to build your sandcastle a long way from the sea.

Less helpful model

The sea can have a very fast tide that sweeps away your sandcastle, you need to remember this and build your castle some distance from the sea.

Use simple questions

Answering a question can be very demanding as the child tries to think of the response, formulate the language, and express his answer clearly within a short time. It is even more difficult if several children are competing to answer the question at the same time.

Questions and answers are essential tools for learning, however modifying the quantity and level of questioning so that it becomes less demanding verbally and therefore less demanding on a child's fluency can be very helpful if the child is stammering severely. Adjustments to this approach can be introduced on a step-by-step basis as the child's speech is more stable, and the therapist should be able to advise when this should be done.

Sample table of questions

Simple	Yes/No questions	Is this your coat?
Slightly harder	Forced alternatives What questions When questions	Do you want carrots or cabbage? What is this? When do you go to bed?
Harder	Why/How	Why do we clean our teeth? How did you get to the seaside?
Very hard	open-ended questions	Tell me about what is happening in this picture? What do you think happened to the princess at the end of the story?

Encourage children to take turns to talk

Primary staff are working to teach young children to take their turn in talking, playing with equipment etc. and a general acceptance in the group that they should not interrupt another child's answer is an important skill for later learning. This convention is particularly helpful for the child who stammers as it takes pressure off him to rush to finish his comments and he is less likely to be dysfluent. However, even if the child does stammer, the adult should not allow him to dominate the talking in the group and he must not be allowed to talk for longer than his turn permits. It is best that he be treated the same as every other child in the group.

Help the child develop self-esteem and confidence

Primary schools recognise the importance of this for all children but it is particularly important for the child who stammers as his confidence may have been dented by his experiences when trying to speak. Staff should celebrate achievement and try to use words of specific descriptive praise, rather than general comments such as 'Well done' or 'Good boy.' Examples are, ' Good boy, Zakib, you have cleaned the paint brushes very well.' Then add a word that describes a quality that the child has just shown, 'That was very helpful (organised, responsible, thorough) of you.'

Detailed and specific praise from staff gives the child more information about what he has achieved. This helps the child to build up a vocabulary of positive words that describe his qualities and achievements. When other children in the group and parents and family also reinforce this, self-esteem is boosted even more. This may help the child to manage his speech.

Talk with the child to ask him what would he like you to do

When the child is aware of his difficulty and parents have agreed, the child may be able to say what he thinks will help him. Therefore a chat in a familiar one-to-one situation might give the opportunity for him to think about what the adult can do to help him. His ideas might be quite positive and sensible, for example to make sure that the other children do not interrupt, that the adult shows that she is still listening. Occasionally however, the child may make entirely negative suggestions, that he does not

want to be asked a question, or contribute to oral activities, and this is where the negotiation becomes more complex.

The adult has to recognise the child's fears and anxieties while at the same time encouraging him to take part in curriculum oral activities. Ideas about how to do this should be worked out with him so that he makes progress in steps to the goals he is working towards. This is differential practice and will take some time and skill, and should be discussed with his therapist when one is involved. **It is important for the primary teacher to balance the challenge of participation in oral work, with the demands on the child's fluency so that he is able to achieve to his potential.**

Answering questions about the speech of the child who stammers

The other children in the class may notice that the speech of the dysfluent child is different and their curiosity may lead them to ask about it. At this age, such a question is not likely to be malicious in intent and the adult should just respond seriously and explain carefully.' James sometimes finds it hard to get his words out. He knows just like you do what he wants to say but he may need more time to say it. We can all help him by waiting until he finishes.' If the child is aware of his speech then provided he, his parents and therapist think it is helpful, staff may want to explain to all the children about stammering, and possibly include those discussions in lessons on personal, social and emotional development.

Teasing and bullying

Even pre-school children may recognise that speech is different and are capable of making unpleasant remarks or even bullying the child who stammers and this is even more likely to happen at primary school. Staff should take action immediately to address this, as their policy on bullying will require them to do and they should keep parents informed.