

Stammering

Advice for staff in the primary school

ONLINE TRAINING ON STAMMERING FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL STAFF IS AVAILABLE AT [BSA EDUCATION](#)

How primary school staff may identify a child who stammers

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 and this can happen as late as 7 years. After that recovery is less likely, as the stammering becomes more embedded but therapy can support the child in managing the stammer so that it does not hold him back at school. Most therapy departments offer a partnership service with the teacher.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 [BSA](#) has details of the latest research.

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.