

Let's Talk

... for people with special communication needs

No. 19

I Think My Child Is Stuttering. What Should I Do?

Many children between the ages of 2 and 4 years go through a stage when they seem to stutter. This disfluent speech can be very disturbing to parents. Is this a stage the child will outgrow or the first sign of a long-term fluency problem?

Most children will become more fluent as they get older and their language skills improve. Disfluent speech is higher in the preschool years when a child is learning to talk, particularly when a child is learning to express new, abstract concepts.

However, you may not want to just wait and see whether your child

will outgrow a disfluent speech pattern. Early intervention for the treatment of stuttering is generally more effective than waiting until a child is in school. If you are concerned about your child's fluency, an evaluation by a speech-language pathologist is recommended. A speech-language pathologist will be able to tell you whether your child's hesitations and sound or word repetitions are similar to those of other children the same age.

The following suggestions may help you know how to respond if your child's speech is disfluent.

Do's and Don'ts for Parents

Do

1. Contact a speech-language pathologist if you are concerned about your child's speech especially if your child seems aware of the disfluency or if the disfluencies are accompanied by signs of tension or frustration.
2. Listen closely when your child talks. Pay attention to what your child says rather than the way it is said.
3. Use a slow rate in your own speech and pause frequently. A slow speaking rate provides a good model for your child. It also gives your child more time to understand what

you are saying and formulate thoughts.

4. Provide opportunities for your child to talk to you without distractions or competition from other family members.
5. Reduce pressure to communicate. For example, limit the number of questions you ask your child since questions demand that your child make an immediate response.
6. Give your child enough time to talk. Limit time pressure. For example, give your child time to answer a question before asking a second question.
7. Observe situations that increase or decrease fluent behavior. Increase the times when your child tends to be more fluent.
8. Recognize that certain language factors may have an effect on

fluency. For example, disfluency may increase if a topic is unfamiliar, difficult to understand, or refers to something that happened in the past. Disfluency may also be greater when complex language is used.

9. Recognize that certain environmental factors may have a negative effect on fluency: competition to speak, excitement, time pressure, arguing, fatigue, new situations, unfamiliar listeners.
10. Repeat or rephrase what your child says to verify that you have understood it.

Don't

1. Don't tell your child to speak differently. Do not say, "Relax," "Slow down," "Take your time," or "Think before you talk."
2. Don't call attention to your child's speech.
3. Don't place your child in situations where his/her speech would be on display.
4. Don't look distressed when your child is disfluent.
5. Don't call your child a "stutterer."
6. Don't interrupt your child.
7. Don't criticize or correct your child's speech.
8. Don't complete your child's sentences.

A previous issue of *Let's Talk* (No. 2) displayed a chart of differences between stuttering and normal disfluency. To receive a free copy of this issue, or for a referral to a speech-language pathologist, call the toll-free HELPLINE, 1-800-638-8255, or write to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 10801 Rockville Pike, Rockville, Maryland 20852.