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Stammering : How Parents Can Help

Stammering can cause both children and parents a lot of concern and can often be very confusing and frustrating. The Irish Association of Speech & Language Therapists (IASLT) offers some key advice on **How to Help Children who Stammer**.

It is important for parents to know that the causes of stammering are **many** and it is usually a combination of reasons. There are also many strategies that parents can use to support the child in decreasing their stammer.

First of all, remember that the child may not recognise that there is anything wrong with his/her speech (from here 'his' will be used). However, continually asking a child to "slow down, think first" etc may be interpreted as a correction of his speech. This may initially be a mystery to him but if the "correction" continues he may perceive himself as doing something 'wrong' each time he speaks and stammers, and may feel that his parents disapprove. He **may** begin to try not to stammer and in the effort of trying, the tension increases, stress about speaking develops, and the stammer symptoms **may** then increase in frequency and severity.

Learn to stop "correcting" the stammering and make sure that nobody else "corrects" it. However, as with all children, some children do not respond in this way to correction because personality type also plays a part. Reactions to stammering alone do not cause stammering.

It is always helpful to be aware of how we react to the child, who stammers, both verbally and non-verbally. We frequently communicate our feelings and thoughts through body language, facial expression etc. Therefore, also try to avoid showing disapproval or anxiety non-verbally. E.g. nervous glance to partner or grandparent just after child stutters while telling a story. Not "correcting" is only part of the wider picture of reacting more positively. Reacting in a more neutral way such as holding eye contact with your child as they are speaking and maybe stuttering is more likely to support recovery, particularly in the younger child.

As far as possible parents could try to remove or ease the possible *pressures* on the child's speech in the early stages. These pressures are not the cause of the stammer, but changes that work to ease these pressures are again associated with reduction of stammering and/or recovery. ***Keep a daily diary and chart anything that may be contributing to making the stammering increase/decrease, however small.*** Use this information to guide you in deciding which changes to make, what changes to keep going with etc e.g. earlier bed time, time out on his own with his juice and a cartoon for ten minutes following play school. This information

and how your child and his stammering respond will also help the speech and language therapist in deciding the best management for your child.

The rate of a child's speech will also affect a child's fluency. The more children have to say the faster they tend to talk. Asking your child to slow down is really asking the impossible (even for some adults!) and it may also contribute to him thinking there is something wrong with how he speaks. Working indirectly is found to be the most effective. So as much as possible:

- ❑ Slow down your own rate of talking and use a gentle, soft tone as this helps create a calm and relaxed atmosphere for speaking.
- ❑ Use a 2-3 second pause when answering your child's question to let him know that it is okay to take time to gather your thoughts.
- ❑ When necessary, play down excitement by keeping calm and refrain from getting too excited in your interactions with your child.
- ❑ Make sure the child knows he has plenty of time to speak and as much as possible try not to make him/her hurry over *anything*. Getting down to his level on your knees may support this.
- ❑ Establishing a time, when *everyone* does deliberately gentle speech will also support the experience of reducing speech rate.

Interrupting may also be viewed as another speech pressure and may contribute to the child speaking faster. Every time the child is interrupted **or interrupts**, it means that he is in a situation where he needs to start what he was saying again, which becomes a speaking pressure. Pay attention to the number of times the child who stammers is being interrupted and interrupts others. Maybe this is a pressure that requires change with your child? Stammering may also increase when there is "**competition to speak**". No family can completely avoid this speech pressure but being aware that this competition to speak exists, makes it possible for parents to control it to a large extent by encouraging the "one person at a time" rule.

Instead, encourage all of your children to develop and practise good turn-taking skills. Turn taking develops best when it is a family affair! Explain to all the family, the importance of taking turns when talking. This concept is best taught during normal play time at first e.g. board-games: 'Mammy's turn', 'Now it's Paul's turn', 'Oh wait, it's not your turn, it's Katie's turn' 'now it's Daddy's turn'. The child learns to trust that their turn will come, and that it works! If turn-taking is then mentioned and reinforced when all children are battling for attention to tell their story about school, turn-taking is a familiar concept that worked before. Make sure all family members take turns so that there is no special attention given to the child who stammers or is going through a phase of stammering.

As much as possible, try to show your child you are interested in what he is saying.

Inattention, half attention or attention lost half-way through the child's conversation may contribute to stammering because there is a pressure on your child to get your attention and keep your attention. In these situations they may start their story, stop and start again or rephrase. Giving your child full attention while he speaks is not always realistic and it is perfectly okay to say to your child that you have 8 more potatoes to peel and you will be all ears when you are finished but make sure that you follow through. Holding eye contact with your child as he is speaking shows your child he has your full attention.

Try not to bring any attention to your child about *how* he speaks.

The onset of stammering occurs most frequently during the same time that a child's language development peaks. Early stammer type sounds may appear as the child learns more speech sounds, more words, longer words and longer sentences. Try not to bring his attention to any aspect of his speech (e.g. pronunciation or grammar errors), particularly if you suspect he is developing a stammer. Instead focus on WHAT he is saying and respond as he would like you to, this will allow you to enjoy your chat with your child and it will be as positive as possible for him. Learning to predict situations that may trigger stammering through keeping the diary will also ease your anxiety as the element of surprise may be removed.

Most therapy has a component that works on empowering parents with knowledge and strategies that will develop changes in the child's home environment to best support recovery. It is not that what was previously happening at home acted alone in causing the stammering but that **these recommended changes are associated with reduction of stammering or recovery from stammering**. It generally works best to pick one or two changes that mean the most (turn-taking tends to be quite popular!) and work on those changes over a month rather than trying to make several changes all at once. Too much change too quickly will not help anyone in the family and you will not get any thanks for it! Parents working together and agreeing on the same changes also works best.

These changes can be challenging to make alone as parents so it is recommended to refer to a speech and language therapist if you are concerned. This will enable a detailed assessment to be carried out that will best inform which changes to make and how.
