

Stuttering in young children

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When three year-old Benjamin started repeating words, his mother started to worry. After attending a Speech-Language Screening clinic offered by one of the many First Words Screening clinics in Ottawa, his mother learned that Benjamin was developing normally and that, like many children between the ages of two and five years, he was going through a normal phase of dysfluency. In the end, Benjamin did not need therapy. Although it happened sporadically over the course of a couple of months, Benjamin's mom knew to listen to WHAT he was saying and not how he was saying it; and she gave him good models of slow speech. Benjamin spoke fluently and has not had any other issues.

Benjamin's experience is not uncommon. When children are learning to speak and use language, it is normal for many of them to repeat words or sounds. Between two and five years of age, many children may go through a "normal phase" of dysfluency or stuttering. In fact, it is hypothesized that the great growth in language skills during this period may be a contributing factor. Using the right words in sentences in the right way within a short period of time may prove to be a difficult task for some children just learning how to use language. During this task of searching for this information, children may pause and repeat whole words ("I-I-I want the ball") or the first syllable ("Mo-mo-mommy...").

This normal phase for many children may last a few days, weeks or even a few months. But it is thought that as many as 75% of preschool children will stop on their own within the first six months. When some children don't outgrow this phase, they may have a true stuttering problem. It is important to be able to identify "normal" dysfluencies from a real stuttering problem.

How to promote easy, fluent speech?

Parents can help children in achieving positive fluent communication with others. Whether it is part of a normal phase of dysfluency or a suspected stuttering, the most important thing to do for the adult is be interested in what the child is saying (content), and not in the way it is being said. Here are a few strategies that you may use:

- Relax – most children will stop. Show interest in what your child is saying!
- Focus on what your child is saying.
- Give your child your full attention and more time to speak. He will soon understand that he doesn't have to hurry and that you are interested in what he is saying.
- Slow down when you speak. Use more pauses between sentences. You are setting a good example that can, in turn, also impact his speech rate.
- Use shorter and simpler sentences.
- Avoid asking questions that your child cannot answer.
- Avoid using words like “slow down” or “relax”. This may make your child more nervous or self-conscious.
- Avoid completing your child's word or sentence – this may prove more disruptive and will not improve fluency. Instead, be patient. Let your child finish his thought.

If you're worried, don't wait it out! Like many other speech and language issues, stuttering problems can best be addressed with early identification and intervention. Earlier intervention for stuttering is better. If you are worried, don't wait it out! In Ottawa, services are available for preschool children through the First Words Preschool Speech and Language Program.

Know the difference between “normal dysfluencies” and “stuttering”!

Parents and caregivers can sometimes tell between a normal phase of dysfluency and a stuttering problem. You can do this by looking at how often a child stutters and in what way over a period of time. The following comparison table highlights

some of the typical behaviours linked with “normal” dysfluencies and a stuttering problem.

Normal dysfluency

- Repetition of words or parts of sentences (I, I, I want or I want, I want, I want a ball).
- Revisions of sentences (I want, I want...I'm going to the store).
- Presence of pauses between words.
- Dysfluencies have appeared recently (within last six months).
- Repetition without effort (e.g. no tension of the lips, no facial tensions, no struggles).
- There are periods of fluency (days or weeks when your child hesitates little or not at all).
- This behaviour does not seem to get worse.
- Your child does not react and/or does not mention his difficulty with his speaking.

Stuttering

- Excessive repetitions of syllables or sounds (He...he...hello).
- Lengthening of sounds (MMMom).
- Blockages of sounds (seems to get “stuck” on a sound).
- Lasts for more than six to 12 months.
- Signs of muscular tensions or physical effort (Blinking of the eyes, shaking of the head, facial contortions, change of voice, intensity or volume).
- The stuttering seems to be increasing.
- Your child avoids speaking, becomes aware of the difficulties and/or mentions the stuttering.

If you are a concerned parent or caregiver contact Ottawa Public Health at 613-580-6744 for more information. Parents can also visit the First Words website at www.firstwords.ca for more information on local screening clinics provided free of charge in the community by First Words. Having an expert's opinion on a child's fluency level will put a parent's mind at ease and will help make a more informed decision about the kind of help – if any – your child might need.

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