

Glossary

Stammering

What is stammering?

Approximately five per cent of all children will experience some difficulty with their fluency at some time during the development of their speech. Approximately 80% will achieve normal fluency, with or without some help.

Stammering may occur at any time during childhood, but it usually starts between the ages of two and five years. (Andrews et al 1983). It is more common in boys than girls and commonly runs in families. Stammering has been defined as 'an abnormally high frequency of duration of stoppages in the forward flow of speech' (Guitar 1998). It is also referred to as 'stuttering' or 'dysfluency'.

What is it like?

One of the most frustrating features of stammering is its variability. The problem can fluctuate from mild to severe depending on the situation, the time of day or for another unidentifiable reason. It is different for each person.

There are some features which are typically characteristic of stammering:

- Repetition of whole words, e.g. "and, and, and, then I left"
- Repetition of single sounds, e.g. "c-c-c-come h-h-here"
- Prolonging of sounds, e.g. "ssssssssometimes I go out"
- Blocking of sounds, where the mouth is in position, but no sound comes out
- Facial tension – in the muscles around the eyes, nose, lips or neck

- Extra body movements may occur as the child attempts to 'push' the word out, such as stamping the feet, shifting body position or tapping the fingers. These may also be referred to as 'concomitant movements'
- The breathing pattern may be disrupted, for example, the child may hold his breath while speaking or take an exaggerated breath before speaking
- Generally the flow of speech is interrupted and this may cause distress to the speaker and the listener

Sometimes a person may adopt strategies to try and minimise or hide the problem, for example:

- Avoiding or changing words – the child may say "I've forgotten what I was going to say" or may switch to another word when he begins to stammer, e.g. "I played with my br-br-br... my sister on Saturday"
- Avoiding certain situations – for instance, speaking in assembly or asking questions in class

What causes it?

Current research is clear that the cause of stammering has a physiological basis in the brain structure. To quote Professor Anne Smith from Purdue University at the Oxford Dysfluency Conference in 2008:

Stuttering emerges in childhood as a symptom the brain's neural circuits for speech are not being wired normally.

Research to date suggests that children are born with a predisposition to stammering, perhaps inherited, and then other factors will influence when and how the stammer emerges and how it progresses. These

factors are broadly divided into four categories – **Physiological, Linguistic, Environmental and Emotional** (Rustin, Botterill and Kelman 1996).

Physiological factors may include – family history, gender, rate of speech.

Linguistic factors may include – language development, understanding and use of language and speech sound skills.

Emotional factors may include – sensitivity, tendency to worry or set high standards.

Environmental factors may include – competition for speaking in turns, teasing at school, periods of difficulty or change.

Can it be treated?

There are a number of different approaches to therapy depending on the nature of the difficulty and the age of the child. For young children, therapy may be indirect (working with parents) or direct (encouraging the child to make changes in their own speech). For older children and adolescents therapy may include development of social skills (eye contact, turn taking, listening), the development of problem solving and negotiation skills, increasing confidence and improving self-esteem. Therapy may also involve identifying strategies to improve fluency, reducing the fear of stammering and finding ways to manage speaking situations more positively.

References

L Rustin, W Botterill and E Kelman (1996) *Assessment and therapy for young dysfluent children: Family Interaction*. Whurr Publishers. London

J Turnbull and T Stewart (1996) *Helping children cope with stammering*. Sheldon Press

L Rustin, F Cook, W Botterill, C Hughes and E Kelman (2001) *Stammering: A practical guide for teachers and other professionals*. David Fulton Publishers. London

R Byrne and L Wright (2008) *Stammering advice for all ages*. Sheldon Press

Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. These publications should be available at academic libraries

Further information

British Stammering Association

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Email: mail@stamma.org
www.stamma.org

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Online resources for parents

www.stamma.org/get-support/parents

The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children

13 – 15 Pine Street
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Tel: 020 3316 8100

www.stammeringcentre.org

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