

Some Suggestions for Families of Young Children who Stutter

Stuttering occurs when a child has difficulty producing smooth, flowing speech. Stuttering appears to be related to many different but related causes, and a child's tendency to be disfluent in a given situation can be triggered by a wide variety of factors. One way to think about the problem is in terms of the specific *stressors* the child experiences, and how these stressors interact with the child's innate abilities for maintaining fluent speech. Examples of stressors include the way people in the child's environment react to the stuttering, the communication model the child hears, and the time pressures the child experiences for producing speech in a rapid and precise fashion. Stressors can also come from within the child. For example, a child may be more sensitive or reactive to the environment, or the child may have perfectionistic tendencies. Together, the child's innate abilities and the child's environment contribute to the situation where the child's speech fluency may be more likely to break down.

Some of the following suggestions may help children speak more easily by reducing the stressors a child feels when communicating. Some of these suggestions are directly related to speaking or listening behaviors, and some are related to more general family routines.

1. Family members should become aware of the overall *pace* of their conversations. If necessary, they can reduce their pace by slightly slowing their speaking rate or increasing the pauses between words and speaking turns (see item #2 below). This reduced pace will minimize time pressures the child may experience, and also provide a model of easy communication that the child can learn to follow when he is having difficulty maintaining fluent speech.
2. Parents should consistently pause for a little less than a second before responding to the child's questions or comments. This technique demonstrates to the child that it is okay to "take one's time" to formulate an answer. It also gives the child permission not to rush into responding before he or she is ready.
3. Parents can try to reduce time pressures the child may experience due to frequent, demanding questions. These questions can be replaced with more indirect requests, comments, or observations. This strategy allows the child to continue to participate in the conversation without being required to respond to frequent demands for speaking.
4. Family members can reduce requests for "performance" or "demand" speech. The child should not be required to speak when he wishes to be quiet. For example, he may smile or wave in greeting or hold up his fingers to indicate his age, rather than be required to use words if he does not want to. Also, performances, such as reciting poems for family members, should be minimized when the child is not comfortable talking in such situations.
5. Listeners should make a conscious effort to listen to *what* the child is saying, rather than the way the child is saying it. Corrective feedback about speaking rate, smoothness of talking, grammar or articulation errors, etc., can be made indirectly by repeating all or part of the child's utterance. This acknowledges the content of the child's speech rather than criticizing the child's manner of speaking.
6. Family members should take turns when talking. Interruptions should be reduced or eliminated, in both adult-child and adult-adult conversation, to minimize time pressures the child may feel. Remember, parents are the role models.
7. Parents should acknowledge and respect the ideas and feelings of their child. Although a parent may not agree with their child's opinions, the child should still have the right to express them.
8. Parents can review any family routines and reduce or eliminate unnecessary pressure about tasks and deadlines. This helps to further reduce time pressures the child may experience.
9. Children benefit when parents are consistent in setting appropriate limits and in dealing with misbehavior. Enforcing such boundaries adds safety to a child's world and may reduce stressors that affect fluency.
10. Above all, a child needs positive attention from his parents, as well as appreciation and pleasure in daily accomplishments – even small and routine ones.

By keeping these suggestions in mind, you can facilitate your child's development of more fluent speech and support the clinician's work in therapy. Together, you can make a difference for your child!