



Supporting a pupil who stammers - a guide for teachers

Introduction

During your teaching career you are likely to come across many children who stammer – but may not recognise this for what it is! This isn't because they don't have a 'bad stammer' but because many children with this kind of speech difficulty find ingenious ways of avoiding speaking. 1 in 80 school children has a stammer, and 4 out of 5 stammerers are likely to be boys.

This practical guide highlights some basic strategies for you to use and encourages teachers to think about their approach to supporting pupils who stammer thereby giving them every opportunity to overcome their dysfluency.

What is stammering?

Stammering, stuttering or non-fluency is an involuntary repetition, prolongation or blockage of words, or parts of words. When a child tries to push through involuntary disruptions in their speech they may begin to avoid eye contact, grimace and use other overt behaviours. But stammering can also involve intense hidden feelings of anxiety, fear, and stress. The cause is unknown, but what we do know is that there is nothing physically or psychologically different about people with a stammer. There is no single irrefutable cure although it can be alleviated greatly by fostering a sympathetic environment.

Signs to look for may include:

- ✓ Your pupil may put extra effort into speaking – this may show in the form of intense concentration or slower speech
- ✓ Speech may sound strained, forced or jerky
- ✓ Phrases, whole words or parts of words get repeated several times e.g. "So-so-so-somebody took my book"
- ✓ Words seem to get stuck in the throat and *no* sounds comes out for a few seconds e.g. ".....my name is Sam"
- ✓ Some sounds may be prolonged or stretched out e.g. "ssssay that again"
- ✓ Your pupil may stop half way through his sentence and start again. This can be mistaken for being long-winded and not getting to the point
- ✓ Your pupil may play for extra time to think and plan his response, or avoid responding by using "what?" or "uh?" Sometimes this can be mistaken for not understanding or not knowing the answer
- ✓ Your pupil may use "fillers" e.g. "um", "er", "like", "you know" and generally sound under-confident or unsure

Other behaviours or signs of stress may include:

- ✓ physical tension e.g. in the shoulders or neck
- ✓ blushing
- ✓ blinking hard or grimacing
- ✓ avoiding eye contact



- ✓ avoiding talking – including causing disruptions to get out of tasks
- ✓ Clearing throat, coughing, gulping or swallowing
- ✓ finger or foot tapping

What can you expect?

Many children will grow out of stammering – unfortunately identifying who will and who won't is not an exact science. The factors that affect prognosis include severity of stammer, gender (girls are more likely to outgrow stammering than boys), and how early the stammer is found and professionally treated (this is particularly true of the child under 6yrs).

A pupil's fluency can change from day to day, or month to month. This does not mean they can talk properly if they want to, but indicates that they are more able to cope with outside influencing factors at different times e.g. if they are well v. sick, feeling confident because a task is familiar v. nervous because something is new and challenging. Your role is to notice what these influencing factors may be and to support the child through this by making reasonable adjustments to our class routines and expectations. Your speech and language therapist will support you with this role.

Stammering is often cyclic or episodic in nature and so it is unwise to lead the child to believe it has gone away for good. This may mean distress, disappointment and a feeling of failure should it return.

Stammering is not caused by a parent's behaviour - but inappropriate behaviour by *anyone* in the child's world can reinforce it.

General Helpful Tips:

- ✓ Find out information about your pupil who stammers before he or she attends your class
- ✓ Talk to him or her in private about their speech. You might consider involving the whole class but *only* with the pupil's full consent and in the context of other problems all children experience.
- ✓ Keep eye contact with your pupil to show that you are listening and that you are not embarrassed
- ✓ Focus on *what* is being said not *how* it is said – respond to this message
- ✓ Include the child in discussion with the parents using neutral language e.g. don't label the non-fluency as stammering but make reference to speech sometimes being "difficult" or "bumpy"
- ✓ Get support from the pupil's speech and language therapist

Build Confidence by

- ✓ Create a relaxed safe place for pupils to practise speaking
- ✓ Help pupils show their full potential in ways other than talking e.g. produce a mind map instead, work in pairs or small groups and have 1 partner present the work.



- ✓ Comment on the importance of *what* they have said, not how they say it
- ✓ Seating arrangements – sitting with or near friends will build confidence as will increasing the distance from teasers or bullies
- ✓ Increase the child's sense of self worth with encouragement and praise. Choose the pupil to carry out important or useful tasks - letting the pupil know that their contributions in class are worthwhile

Participation

- ✓ Encouraging pupils to join in all activities
- ✓ Always provide a non-verbal option for a child who really cannot cope with speaking in that situation e.g. a show of hands, a nod, an illustration or silent demonstration
- ✓ The child who stammers may well be interested in participating in acting, singing or class assembly. This could boost their confidence and subsequently relieve their stammer

Speaking situations

- ✓ Agree a strategy for reading aloud with the pupil e.g. he may like to go first and "get it over with", arrange some *choral reading* in pairs or in severe cases you may prefer to do this at playtime when the class is out
- ✓ Good and bad day – allow an option for them to read aloud on a better day
- ✓ Give pupils time to answer questions
- ✓ when taking the register call names out of sequence and call the pupil's name early – this helps alleviate any anxiety build up as he anticipates his name
- ✓ Help pupils gain confidence at speaking by slowly building up the size of the audience starting with twos, then building up to small groups and the whole class

Teasing, bullying and other social problems

- ✓ Treating bullying as the wider issue that it is – this avoids singling out the child who stammers and drawing unwanted attention
- ✓ Talk with the child in private and develop a strategy with him or her to help them be more assertive, and therefore less likely to be teased
- ✓ Counsel the child to use behaviour that demotivates bullies e.g. ignoring the remarks, or responding with humour not aggression
- ✓ Use PSHE lessons and school assemblies to raise awareness of handicaps in general, encouraging a supportive, inclusive school culture that is intolerant of bullying
- ✓ Encourage pupils to play with supportive friends, especially on bad days



Avoid:

- ✓ Singling out the child who stammers
- ✓ Making light of the stammer or difficult situations
- ✓ Asking too many questions, too quickly
- ✓ Rushing pupils
- ✓ Asking pupils to slow down
- ✓ Asking pupils to start again
- ✓ Advising pupils to take a deep breath
- ✓ Finishing their words or sentences for them
- ✓ Imposing time pressure on talking situations
- ✓ Interrupting

Where can I get further help?

If you need help or advice, contact your speech and language therapist.

Alternatively, contact the British Stammering Association, who hold directories of specialist speech and language therapy provision. The BSA offer trained advice, helplines and literature on stammering and also have a lending library for members.

You can also obtain information from your Local Education Authority (LEA) and from the Joint Council for the GCSE, Devas Street, Manchester, M15 6EX Tel: 0161 953 7557 Fax: 0161 953 7588.