

Stuttering: Shattering the Myths
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In my practice working with youngsters and their families, I meet children who face all types of communication challenges. Without a doubt, stuttering is the most misunderstood of all the communication disorders. By the time I meet a child and her family, they have almost always been told countless myths by well meaning pediatricians, psychologists, teachers and friends, such as *"She'll grow out of it."*, *"Just slow down."*, or *"All children go through a period of stuttering."*

The truth is, many children will not outgrow stuttering without help. The truth is, if it were as easy as slowing down, children would not stutter. The truth is, only about 20% of all children go through a transitory period of stuttering during their early development.

When the well intentioned advice to ignore stuttering or slow down hasn't worked, the child and family are often left with a sense of failure. Many children I have met for the first time tell me that they do not believe anything can help them. These children have often been through speech therapy that did not work. They have often developed highly sophisticated ways to attempt to masquerade their stuttering. The social stigma of stuttering is further perpetuated by media portrayals of cartoon, movie and sitcom characters who stutter as bumbling, foolish, nervous, or socially incompetent. The truth is, children who stutter are often some of the most engaging, motivated, funny and smart children I have ever met!

What are the facts about stuttering? According to the Stuttering Foundation of America, some children go through a period of "normal dysfluency" as they are learning language, usually between the ages of 2-4. Stuttering is most common in the preschool age group, but occurs in all age groups, almost always developing before age 12. Most children who are learning to speak do not speak perfectly. Young children often repeat what they say, have to restart themselves when explaining something, and may get stuck on a sound or syllable. This is called "normal dysfluency" and may even include repeating whole words or phrases several times. If your child is going through a period of normal dysfluency, some suggestions that may help her move through this period successfully are to: listen patiently to what your child is saying and not how she is saying it; do not talk about the stuttering in front of the child; avoid filling in words for your child; keep neutral body language and do not show that you are concerned about the dysfluency even if you are; try not to interrupt your child; use an unhurried, relaxed style of speaking, adding lots of extra pauses into your own speech; and maintain eye contact with your child when she is dysfluent.

Red flags that distinguish stuttering from normal dysfluency include significant facial and body tension accompanying speech; individual sound prolongations lasting more than a few seconds; attempts at speech where no sound comes out; an increase in the pitch of your child's voice when stuttering; involuntary movements of the head, face, arms or legs during stuttering; stuttering on more

than 10% of all words; or avoidance of communication altogether. Some risk factors that also may raise a red flag include a family history of stuttering or stuttering persisting more than 6-12 months. Persistent and consistent stuttering is unlikely to resolve with age unless your child receives therapy.

Many people want to know what causes stuttering and what stuttering is. Recent brain imaging studies suggest that there may be subtle differences in the brain activity or brain structure for people who stutter. Most of these studies have been adult studies, and much more research is needed in this area. Most likely, stuttering has several causes, and will result when all of these factors come together. We do know that for some children, stuttering is transmitted genetically. However even for those children, it appears that certain environmental factors have to be present for the stuttering to develop.

FACT: Children who stutter are no more likely to have psychological problems than children who do not stutter. FACT: Children who stutter usually begin gradually and not as a result of any sudden trauma. FACT: Studies have shown that parents, caregivers or styles of child rearing do not cause stuttering.

Although experts can not be sure what the exact cause of stuttering is, we do know what helps children who stutter. Talking openly about stuttering, once stuttering is identified by a professional, is usually very helpful. It is important that the child feels her stuttering is not a 'secret' or something to hide. Providing a calm, unhurried lifestyle at home can be incredibly helpful. Plan ahead and talk about big changes such as a new home or school. Eliminate inquisition style questioning and minimize questioning in general. Eliminate putting your child on stage, or requiring on-command speech such as *'Tell Aunt Margie about your school play.'* Instead use statements, in front of your child, such as *"Aunt Margie, Laura was just in a play at school and was fabulous. Maybe she'll tell you about it later."* Use comments instead of questions. Wait for your child to begin talking and join in.

It is important to mention that the child who stutters should not get other special treatment. The child who stutters should be expected to follow all the same family rules about behavior, bed time, social skills as the other children in the family. Strive for middle ground when it comes to expectations for orderliness and cleanliness.

If you think your child may be struggling with stuttering, it is important to contact a professional speech and language pathologist who has significant experience working with children who stutter. You can get a list of experienced speech pathologists at the Stuttering Foundation of America website at www.stutteringhelp.org or by calling (800) 992-9392. In addition, they have videos and DVD's available at low cost for children, their families and their teachers. The American Speech and Hearing Association can also refer you to a professional in your area at www.asha.org or (800) 638-8255. The National Stuttering Association at www.nsastutter.org or (800)-937-8888 provides resource information for children, adults, teenagers, teachers, doctors and employers.

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