

## Information for Schools about Stammering

Stammering, also known as stuttering is common in children. It happens in all cultures and social groups. Research shows that it is primarily a neurological condition, not psychological, related to the part of the brain where speech develops. Stammering is often hereditary; approximately 60% of people who stammer have another family member who stammers.

Approximately one in twelve children will experience stammering, usually between the ages of two and five however some children will start to stammer after the age of five. Stammering is very individual and will present differently in each child.

A child may:

- Repeat sounds e.g. 'a-a-apple' or words e.g. 'my my my turn'
- Stretch out sounds in a word e.g. 'mmmmum'
- Get stuck on a sound where no sound comes out for several seconds
- Show signs of tension in their face
- Use body movements to help get words out
- Avoid certain words or speaking situations

Many children will stop stammering naturally or with the help of speech and language therapy, some children will continue to stammer as they get older. It is very difficult to predict what will happen. Stammering is also variable, sometimes a child may stammer a lot and sometimes very little.

As children get older, they may become more self-conscious about their stammer and develop 'tricks' for getting their words out. This could include tapping their feet, blinking or pushing words out with extra force.

Children may feel confused about why they stammer. They may also feel worried and embarrassed and try to hide their stammer. They may speak less or avoid certain words or speaking situations. Stammering is often accompanied by negative thoughts. These thoughts, which are often fed by other people's responses, can lead to the fear of stammering being all-encompassing and dominating a child's life. The impact of a stammer can be profound, impacting upon a child's social skills, self confidence and long term achievements.

It may be difficult to recognise that a child stammers because some children will go to huge lengths to hide their stammer. They may avoid speaking in classroom situations, appear withdrawn or isolated from their peers.

## **How You Can Help - What You Do Makes a Big Difference!**

If you work with a child who stammers, talk to parents about it first and take the lead from them before speaking to the child privately about how you can help. How you respond to a child who stammers can have a big impact upon how they feel.

Acknowledge their difficulties, be open with and talk to them about their stammer whenever they want to. Ask them what you can do to help. You may discuss:

- Taking the register: Ask the child what will help: you may offer a choice of different responses (verbal and non-verbal) to the whole class. If the child is particularly anxious, you could change the order in which names are called, ensuring that the child is asked early.
- Using less stressful speaking situations to build a child's confidence. These may include: speaking in unison with someone else when reading out loud, reciting familiar lists e.g. the days of the week, speaking in smaller groups, singing or speaking in a strong rhythm e.g. poems.
- Speaking in front of a larger audience: the child should never feel that they have to speak but should be encouraged and given the opportunity to do so if they wish, contributing in unison may be helpful in this situation.
- Making reasonable adjustments such as giving the child more time in oral examinations or presentations (*For more information about reasonable adjustments see [www.stamma.org](http://www.stamma.org): reasonable adjustments in education*)

### **General strategies**

- Focus on what the child is saying, not how they are saying it.
- Show that you are listening by keeping natural eye contact.
- Saying their name, using new vocabulary, explaining complex ideas and being under time pressure can be difficult for children who stammer, be aware of this and encourage and praise them when they speak in these situations.
- Allow each child to finish what they are saying without interruption. Help the child to feel there is no hurry to finish.
- Build the child's confidence by praising them for what they do well.
- Avoid telling the child to slow down or take a deep breath. While this is well meant, slowing down our rate of speech is extremely difficult to maintain and taking a deep breath is not always helpful.

- Encourage the child to contribute in class and small group discussions however avoid putting the child on the spot by directly asking them questions, allow them to answer questions when they want to and give them as much time as they need.
- Be aware of your body language. A relaxed and calm appearance can help the child feel at ease.
- Make it clear that you are there and that they can talk to you whenever they like. Encourage them to tell you how to support them. Openness and a relaxed attitude will give them the message that they are so much more than their stammer.
- Give the child a 'buddy' to support them in and out of class or allow the child to work with friends or people that they feel comfortable with.
- Children who stammer can be more at risk of being teased or bullied, be vigilant and follow your schools anti bullying policy if this is happening.
- Share information about stammering with other staff at school so that everyone knows what they can do to help.

**For further information and support visit:**

- [www.stamma.org](http://www.stamma.org)
- [www.actionforstammeringchildren.org](http://www.actionforstammeringchildren.org)
- Watch 'My stammering tap' a short animation made by children and adults who stammer <https://vimeo.com/239094673>
- Watch 'Wait, wait, I'm not finished yet' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je7mlAzyD7A> a video produced by the Michael Palin Centre, a specialist centre for children who stammer.
- Stambassadors connects people from the world of work with young people who stammer, sharing their stories and inspiring young people to think big when they are considering career choices. Visit <https://actionforstammeringchildren.org/get-involved/stambassadors>