

# Supporting Students who Stutter

## A teacher's role

Teachers play an important role in the lives of children who stutter. At school children are expected to communicate in many different ways including sharing ideas, presenting work to the class, and asking and answering questions. For children who stutter, these tasks can be a huge challenge. Teachers have the opportunity to create a supportive learning environment for these children, which can help them to communicate with confidence.

## What is stuttering?

Stuttering is a physical disorder, most likely resulting from a problem in the neural processing involved in speech production. It also appears that a genetic predisposition may be involved in the development of the disorder. It is now known that stuttering is not caused by nerves, low intelligence, or parenting style.

There are different types of stutters; repetitions, prolongations and blocks.

As self awareness and anxieties develop, some children start to hide their stutter by switching words so they don't have to say "feared" words, adding in fillers and run ins e.g. "you know... um", or choosing not to talk at all rather than risk stuttering in front of their classmates.

Additionally, children who stutter may also move their arms, hands, legs or face as they attempt to produce the word. It can also be hard to maintain eye contact, and they may blush.

Every child who stutters will do so differently, and will have different feelings and attitudes towards their speech. Teachers play an important role in supporting the child who stutters, as they tackle the everyday task of talking in the classroom.

### Repetitions

Repeating parts of words "p p p pancake"

Or whole words and phrases "my my my one"

### Prolongations

The word is stretched  
"ssssssssandwiches"

### Blocks

The word gets stuck with no sound coming out "p.... ....an-cakes"

## Stuttering and peer interactions

Often when children have grown up together, or have been in a class with someone who stutters before, stuttering is not an issue. However, it is important for teachers to monitor other students' responses to stuttering and to encourage all students to have an acceptance of differences.

In some cases children may not know what stuttering is. This can lead to name calling or teasing. Most schools have a strict anti-bullying policy which should be applied. Sometimes children need to be told what stuttering is so that they understand it, e.g. "Stuttering is when our words get stuck. Everyone has some bumps when they talk, even people on TV and teachers too!! Because a person who stutters know what they want to say, it's best for us just to wait for them to finish speaking."

Encouraging people to take turns when talking and allowing people to finish can help the child who is stuttering.

## Classroom Communication

### Roll call



There are non-verbal methods that still achieve the goal of establishing who is present. You can try a 'hands up' alternative – practicing eye contact at the same time - or use a written list that the students check as they enter class.

### Reading aloud

Children who stutter often find it easier to read in unison, rather than individually. If the whole class is asked to read in pairs, this avoids singling out the child who stutters.

### Presentations



Practice is important for presentations, and alternatives such as presenting to a small group (rather than the full class) could be considered for a student who stutters. Consider adapting activities so that the task goal is still achieved, but the method in which it is executed is varied to suit an individual's needs. Placing emphasis on the content of talks, rather than just the presentation style, can be a reassuring message for students.

### Class discussions

Ensure the child who stutters is included in a group of supportive peers. Giving guidelines for good turn taking may promote equal involvement.

### Answering questions

It is likely to be easier for children who stutter to answer a short answer question than give a long reply. If the whole class is taking turns to speak, many people who stutter would prefer to speak first, as this limits the time in which anxiety and tension can build up.

Having an open discussion with the child (and parents) can be useful to establish ground rules. As each child who stutters is different, you will need to consider the child's strengths and particular areas of difficulty to support him/her in your class.

## Summary

### Things to do:

- Concentrate on what is being said, not the way it is being said
- Show that you are listening by keeping natural eye contact, and allowing the student time to finish what he/she is saying
- Encourage other children to take turns and not interrupt and monitor for any teasing that may occur
- Develop an understanding that everyone has differences within the class
- Think about the goals for activities and how the method of presentation can be changed but the goals still met

### Things to avoid:

- Any approach that singles out the child who stutters
- Firing too many questions too quickly
- Asking the student to slow down or start again or think about what he/she is going to say
- Finishing the student's sentences and/or interrupting
- Making light of the situation
- Looking concerned or impatient

The Speech Language Therapists at START specialise in working with children (and adults) who stutter. Please feel free to contact us for more information.