



Supporting a Child with **Dysfluency (Stammering):**  
A Guide for Parents



# Supporting a Child with Dysfluency (Stammering)

If you have noticed signs that your child has dysfluency of speech (their speech isn't fluent or they stammer) and you're unsure what to say to your child in these situations, this guide will help you to develop an understanding of what dysfluency is. It covers topics such as the signs of dysfluency, where you can access help and how to support your child at home to feel comfortable and confident in their speech.

## What is dysfluency?

Dysfluency, often called stammering or stuttering, is the inability to produce smooth, fluent speech. It can vary in severity according to the person and the situation they are in. People with dysfluency can fluctuate from being a relatively fluent speaker to finding it tricky to get their words out.

Dysfluency often starts between the ages of two and five but it can start later on. In some children, the onset of dysfluency is gradual; in others, it comes on quite suddenly. Most children will go on to speak fluently but some will continue to stammer into adulthood.

With the right support and understanding, stammering doesn't need to be a concern - if it is affecting your child's wellbeing or social development, you should seek support. Some people who stammer do so all their life and feel no need to find ways to change their speech pattern. This [article](#), written by Twinkl Digest, explores dysfluency from the perspective of a person with a stammer.

## Signs of Dysfluency

It is important to tell the difference between dysfluency and what is classed as a typical level of dysfluency. We all have some typical dysfluency. This includes oral revision of sentences, whole word or phrase repetition, pauses, the use of filler words 'er' and 'um', hesitations and occasional part-word repetitions. However, someone with dysfluency will have a range of other difficulties in addition to these.

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## Signs of Dysfluency

Signs of dysfluency tend to become apparent between the ages of two and five, while a child is still developing their speech. Things to look out for in your child's speech are:

prolonged sounds, e.g. "Ssssave it for mmmmmme."

one-syllable word repetition, e.g. "I went to-to-to-to-to bed."

part word repetition, e.g. "I w-w-w-w-w-went to school."

frequent pauses, as if the word is lost, e.g. "I found the (pause) pencil."

an increase in hesitation or repetition in speech

physical gestures, such as stamping the foot, blinking or other facial gestures to get the word out

consistently using sounds such as 'um' or 'er' to fill gaps in speech

an increase in awareness of their difficulty and frustration at stammering

fluency is affected by heightened emotion, such as becoming excited or upset

avoidance of certain social situations, such as answering a telephone or going to a shop, where they might need to interact with someone they are not familiar with



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## Signs of Dysfluency

If your child is at school, their teacher might also notice difficulties in certain situations:

They might stammer when speaking with an unfamiliar member of staff or someone in authority, such as a teacher, headteacher or visitor to school.

They might find it hard to speak in front of the whole class.

They might avoid reading aloud.

They might not want to answer when the register is taken.

They might not put their hand up to answer questions in lessons.

## What causes dysfluency?

Dysfluency is not caused by anything the parents have done. The actual causes are unclear, although it has been found that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of people with dysfluency have a family history of stammering. Research has also found that the brains of people who have dysfluency process speech and language slightly differently from those who are fluent speakers.

Dysfluency is more common in boys than in girls.



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## Diagnosis

If you think your child has dysfluency, the chances are that other caregivers have noticed it too. Talk to your child's teacher or childcare setting to see what they have noticed and observed about how your child speaks and how it is affected in different situations.

Your child's school **SENDCo** might complete a formal observation, looking at your child's interactions and noting what difficulties they are experiencing. It's a good idea to keep a journal at home of problems you have observed and situations where the symptoms seem to be exacerbated.

Talk to your child's GP, health visitor or school SENDCo, who might refer you to a **speech and language therapist** to assess your child. They will look at your child's developmental history, gather information from you about your observations, talk to and play with your child and observe their difficulties. They will be able to feed back to you about what they have observed.

## The Next Steps

From their findings, the speech and language therapist will be able to explain the difficulties your child is experiencing in more detail to you and devise a plan of support. This plan will be shared with your child's school or childcare provider so that any activities suggested can also be carried out in their setting. You might be given some activities or games to do at home or suggestions to make tweaks to the way you communicate at home which will be beneficial for your child. Your child might see a speech therapist on a regular basis so that they can assess the effectiveness of the support and make further recommendations as your child develops.



# What can I do to support my child?

## Be Patient



It can be very frustrating as a parent to want to solve your child's problems as soon as possible, however, trying to hurry up a child with dysfluency can make the problem worse. Instead, try to reduce the amount of stress and pressure you put on them. Give them time to formulate their ideas and get them across.

## Think About Home



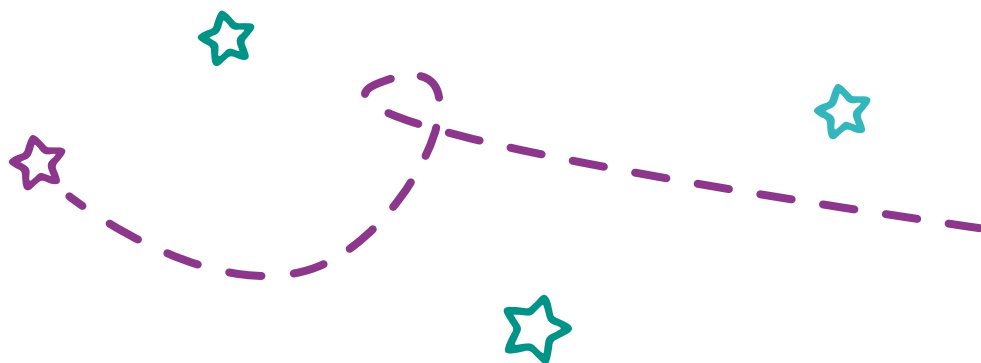
Stammering can be exacerbated by feelings of stress and anxiety. Have a think about your home: When do you notice the stammer the most? Is it at times when it's more stressful, such as bedtimes? What things could you put in place to make it less stressful? Perhaps there are arguments between family members that cause anxiety at home. How could you change this so that your child feels more secure? Are you providing opportunities for them to talk comfortably about familiar topics? You could use dinner times to chat about the day, giving them the option to talk about something familiar to them. Playing games together to develop opportunities for speech can be really fun and bring you closer, too.

## Slow Down and Think About Your Speech



When you talk to your child, slow your speech down and model fluency in your own speech. Try to speak as smoothly as possible so that they can hear good practice all the time. Use pauses so that they can see you don't have to be in a hurry to get words out.

Decrease the number of questions you ask your child, especially during times of stress or injury: it's highly likely that fluent speech will be less likely in these situations.



# What can I do to support my child?

## Advise Less



It's natural to want to help your child as much as possible, but by giving them advice, you might just be hindering them. Avoid telling them to slow down - this can cause them to think that they are no good at speaking and might cause further dysfluency.

If they're stammering on a particular word, don't finish their sentence for them - this can put them off speaking at all. Give them time to finish - don't pressure them. Don't ask them to repeat something and don't tell them to relax - it's guaranteed to make them do the opposite.

## Never Joke



A funny quip or a tiny remark made in jest can be very damaging to the stammering child. Watch what you say so that they never see you make light of their difficulties and never, ever, let anyone else get away with saying unkind things - even if they think they're saying them as a joke. Your child is probably already putting pressure on themselves about their difficulties - the last thing they need is for others to think it's funny.

## Listen Carefully



Change your way of listening to them. Instead of focusing on how they are speaking, focus only on the content of what they are saying. Show you are listening by using nods and smiles for encouragement and maintain comfortable eye contact with them. Wait for them to finish before you start speaking. Put your phone away and don't be distracted by other things. This will give them the message that what they say is really important and takes the pressure off the process of speaking.

## Connect in Other Ways



Making a connection with your child doesn't always have to include talking - it can be exhausting for your child and frustrating for both of you. Instead, try to enjoy spending time together doing an activity that requires little speech. A great film or a quiet walk or bike ride together is just as important as talking. It can be refreshing to see your child enjoying things and having fun without the need for speaking.

# What can I do to support my child?

## Build in Time Out



This one's just for you. People don't often think of the impact having a stammering child might have on the parent. It's exhausting having to examine what you say, be patient and think constantly about being that role model for your child.

It can also be frustrating: Why are they suddenly not speaking fluently? What am I doing wrong? The answer is absolutely nothing. They'll have days when they stammer frequently and days when they seem to have regressed. Don't panic - it's all normal in the life of a stammering child.

Make sure you have time out, without your child. When you're finding it frustrating or upsetting, put out some toys, give them a book or put the TV on, ensure they're safe and retreat to another room for a breather.

Plan some extended time away for yourself. It doesn't have to be doing something expensive: a drink with a group of friends, an evening playing silly games with your partner or a woodland walk are just as invigorating as time at a spa - and often more enjoyable, too.

Seek help from others whose children also have dysfluency. Build your own support tribe of people who understand what you're going through and who will listen and offer advice. In time, you'll be that parent with a wealth of experience offering valuable support to someone else.



### Disclaimers:

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

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