

Stammering in Young Children - The Facts and How to Help

What is Stammering?

Up to 8% of children will stammer at some point, most commonly starting between the ages of two and five. Stammering (also known as stuttering) isn't caused by nerves. It's a neurological condition, meaning it is to do with the way the brain is wired and develops, and is often related to the child's language development. As with other neurological conditions, stammering can run in families.

A child who is stammering may show some or all of the following features:

- 1) Repetitions – this may be sounds, syllables, words or phrases.
- 2) Prolongations - stretching the sounds out.
- 3) Blocking - getting stuck on a sound or word.

If there is a lot of struggle, you may notice other features, such as visible tension, head or body movements, grimacing, going red in the face, shaking, clenching fists, etc. Stammering features will probably vary in their frequency (how often you see them) and severity according to the speaking situation.

Causes and Development of Stammering

Learning to talk is one of the hardest things a young child has to master and doesn't always proceed smoothly. Many young children struggle with their words as their brain tries to sort out what it is they're trying to say. Coordinating the complicated and rapid sequence of movements needed to produce speech requires the use of over a hundred different muscles, which puts a huge demand on the child's developing brain.

Stammering may come on gradually or can literally start overnight. Stammering is often more noticeable when the child is having a rapid expansion of language learning, e.g. gaining lots of new vocabulary and grammar and starting to use longer sentences. Tiredness and strong emotions such as anxiety or excitement are also likely to affect it.

Stammering can be episodic. You may find that as the child gets older, the fluent periods gradually lengthen and the stammering periods gradually decrease. A small minority of children will continue to stammer into adulthood – this is often, but not always, those children where there is a history of stammering within the family. As there are other factors which can affect it, we can't easily identify those children who will stop stammering and those who will continue to stammer.

It's important to remember that parents do not cause stammering. However, there's lots you can do to support your child. There's no guaranteed method which will 'fix' or cure the stammer, but the right support can prevent it from becoming a serious problem for the child.

Why Does Stammering Come and Go?

A useful way to think about stammering is to imagine an old fashioned set of weighing scales. These represent a child's talking. On one side we have the child's abilities which help them with their talking; on the other side are demands on the child. These demands may be internal, e.g. the struggle to say sounds clearly or put longer sentences together, or they may be external, caused by the person talking to the child or the environment in which they're talking.

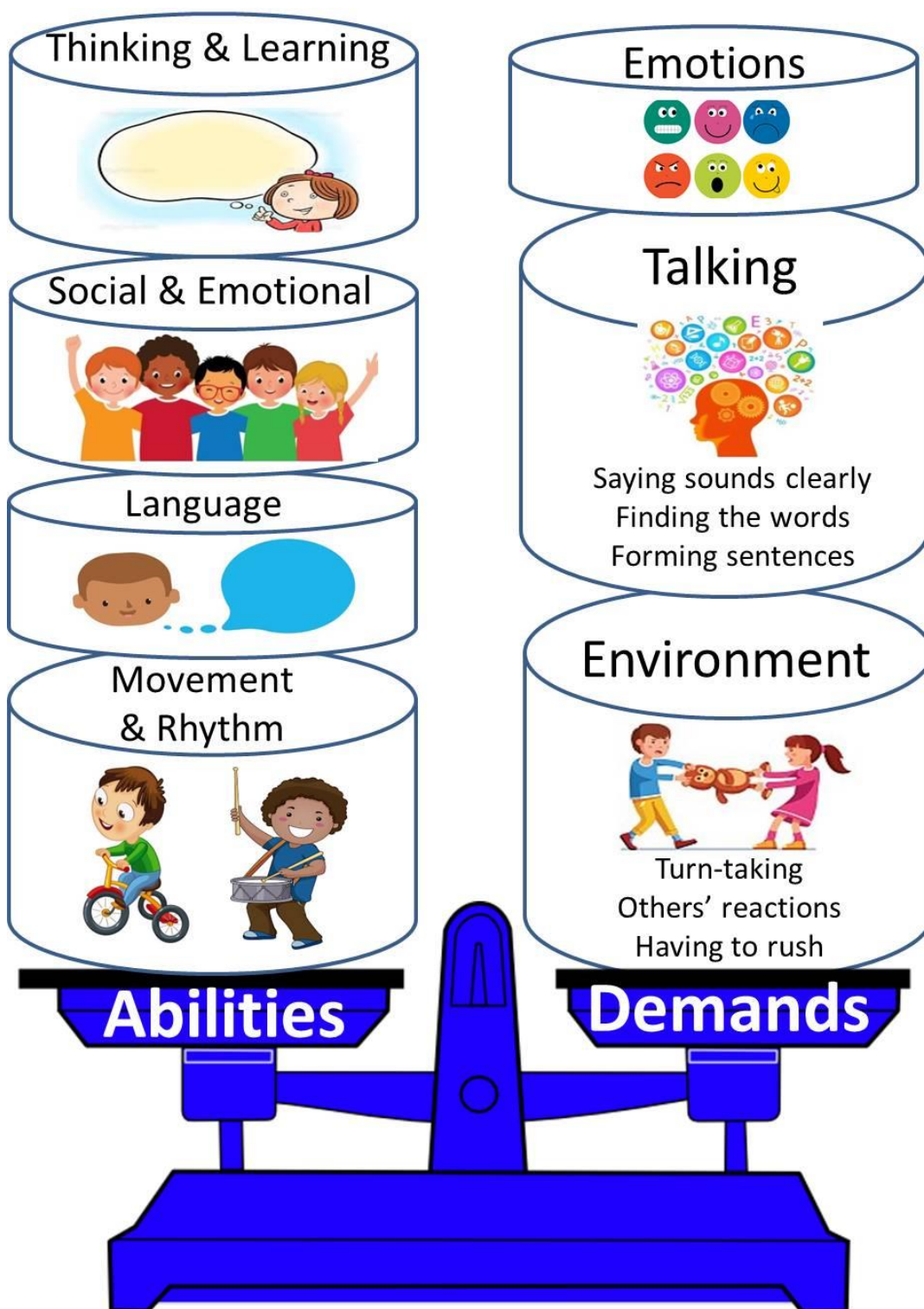
If the scales tip one way, the child can talk smoothly, but if they tip the other way because of too many demands, then the child's brain becomes overloaded and stammering may occur as a result. This is why stammering is rarely consistent but tends to come and go as demands vary. It is also why most children's stammering reduces as their language and motor skills develop and improve, allowing their brain to cope with greater demands.

Some Common External Demands:

- **Time pressure** – with busy lives and lots of daily activities, there may be a sense of “hurriedness”. The child feels rushed and tries to speak quickly.
- **Other people talking quickly** – the child has to work harder to process the information quickly enough and think of how to respond.
- **Turn-taking** – the child feels they can't have their say in the conversation or fears being interrupted.
- **Complexity of language** – the child struggles to understand what is being said and therefore finds it harder to respond.
- **Answering questions** – when we ask a child a question, we are demanding a response, which can put added pressure on.
- **Negative or impatient reactions to stammering** – this can affect how the child begins to feel about the stammering.

How to Help

Try to identify any demands on the child which seem to make them more likely to stammer. Sometimes the stammering may appear to be quite random. However, if you can identify demands in your child's environment and start thinking about how to reduce them, this can help to re-balance the scales, helping the child to speak more easily. Sometimes only a small change is needed to make a difference.



Reducing Demands

Time Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try and be calm and less 'hurried' during activities so that the child does not feel rushed. Make sure the child is allowed some 'down time' during the day. • Show the child that you are listening to them. Maintain relaxed eye-contact. • Wait for the child to finish speaking and avoid interrupting. If you are busy and not able to give your child your full attention when they're trying to tell you something, be honest with them and tell them you can't listen properly right now, but you'll make time to listen to what they want to tell you as soon as you can.
Talking Quickly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow your own speech slightly when talking to the child – putting lots of pauses in while speaking or before responding is a helpful way of doing this. Children learn about talking from the way others around them speak. By slowing yourself down, you are helping your child to speak more slowly and giving them the message that there's no rush.
Turn-Taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is an important skill all children have to learn. Talk about taking turns and make sure you manage turn-taking within the family – this is especially important if the child has chatty siblings! If this is an issue within your family, try and have regular one-to-one time with your child who stammers, so they know they won't be interrupted and will be able to have their say during these times.
Complexity of Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your own language simple – use short simple sentences and reduce the number of questions you use. Children find it easier to process and respond to simpler language and will not be overstretching themselves to produce language which is too sophisticated for their abilities.

Helpful Reactions to Stammering

- Try and remain calm and relaxed about the stammering. It's normal for parents to feel anxious when a child starts stammering, but try and avoid transmitting that anxiety to the child.
- Be mindful of the language you use around the child. Avoid using words like 'bad', e.g. "his stammer's really bad today."
- Accept any attempts at talking. Don't correct or criticise the child's talking.
- Avoid asking the child to stop, slow down, start again or take a breath. If you feel your child is going too fast, try saying, "It's OK, there's no rush."
- Listen to WHAT your child is trying to tell you, rather than focusing on how they're saying it.
- Praising your child's communication skills will boost their confidence and prevent them from internalising the idea that they're not good talkers. Some examples of praise you could use:
 - "What a brilliant word you used. I didn't know you knew that word. What a lot of new words you're learning."
 - "That was a very long sentence. Well done!"
 - "I really liked the way you explained that. It was really clear."
 - "You listened really well then."

Talk about Stammering

Many parents and teachers worry about mentioning the stammer, but it's absolutely fine to talk about it with the child. Many adults who stammer say they wish their parents had talked about it more with them when they were young. Talking about stammering can help to reassure the child and prevent any anxiety around speaking from taking hold.

If your child's stammer is easy and relaxed and they don't appear to be aware they're doing it, there's probably no need to say anything about it at this stage.

However, if your child is obviously stuck or there are signs of frustration, you can acknowledge the struggle, e.g. "I can see that word was a bit tricky for you." Then add some reassurance, e.g. "It's OK, you're still learning with your talking. I'm listening." If they're obviously frustrated or distressed, it might help to normalise and validate their emotions by talking about that: "It's annoying when our words get stuck, isn't it?"

You may want to offer help: "Shall we say the word together?" and praise them when they finish. "Well done, you said it".

If you notice your child start to avoid talking or they give up when speaking, it's important to talk to them about it and encourage them to keep trying.

It might sound flippant, but the best thing you can do for your child is genuinely not to care that they stammer. If they can see that the stammer isn't a problem for you, it's less likely to become a problem for them. Stammering only starts to become a problem if the child develops negative thoughts and feelings associated with it. There are many successful, happy people out there who don't let their stammer hold them back.

Speech and Language Therapy can support you with all of the above, and we can also liaise with your child's nursery or school, so do get in touch as soon as you become concerned. As a parent, you can refer yourself to the service.

Stephanie Burgess, Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist