Helping Stutterers

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If you've ever worked with a student who stutters, you understand that feeling of helplessness. How do you talk to the child about his or her speech? Should that child be expected to give oral reports, read out loud, or answer questions? What should you do if other students tease that child? If you're not sure how to handle this situation, you're not alone. The key is to understand what causes stuttering and be armed with strategies that can help the child reach his or her full academic potential while easing social difficulties.

Stuttering interferes with a person's ability to speak fluently. It involves the repetition; prolongation; or blockage of sounds, syllables, or words.

When a child stutters, he may hesitate to raise his hand in class, read aloud, or talk with other children in the class.

Stuttering usually begins between the ages of two and four. While there is no known cause, researchers agree that stuttering likely results from an interaction of factors including child development, family dynamics, genetics, and neurophysiology.

Preschool and Kindergarten

Children in this age group are learning to talk. As such, they make speech "mistakes" or disfluencies. Some children have more disfluencies others, and this is normal. Certain children, however, have many disfluencies—particularly repetition and prolongation of sounds.

Approximately 5% of all children go through a period of stuttering that lasts six months or more. Three-quarters of those will recover by late childhood, leaving about 1% with a long-term problem.

If you think there may be a stuttering problem developing with

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one of your preschool or kindergarten students, don't give special attention to the child at this point. Rather, talk to a speech pathologist for suggestions.

Also, talk to the parents about the problem to find out whether this is typical speech behavior for the child. In most instances, if parents, teachers, and others listen to and answer the child in a patient, calm, and unemotional way, the child's speech returns to normal as his language abilities improve and he adjusts to school. If the child continues to have disfluencies, however, you may want a speech pathologist to observe him.

**Elementary**

Some children in this age group not only repeat and prolong sounds markedly, but also struggle and become tense and frustrated in their efforts to talk. They need help. Without it, their stuttering problem will probably adversely affect their classroom performance. As suggested with the preschool child, consult with a speech pathologist and the child's parents to discuss your observations. If, as a team, they agree that the child's disfluencies are different from other children in the classroom, you may decide to evaluate the child for stuttering.

A major concern for most teachers is the child's reactions to and feelings about his stuttering. How should the child be expected to participate in class? The answer depends on the individual child.

At one extreme is the child who is unconcerned and happy to participate because he doesn't have any negative feelings associated with talking. At the other extreme is the child who will cry and refuse to talk as he or she feels frustrated, anxious, embarrassed, or even ashamed. If a child has negative feelings about talking, he or she may be unwilling to raise his hand, pretend that he doesn't know an answer when called on, or withdraw from social situations such as sitting with others at lunch or playing with a group on the playground.

Most children who stutter are somewhere in between the two extremes. If the child is being seen by a speech pathologist, find out his or her opinion about reasonable expectations. Also, ask the child how he or she would like to participate. Sometimes participation requirements become part of the child's IEP.

**Show Support**

Usually it is advisable for you to talk with the child privately. Explain that when talking, we sometimes make mistakes. We bobble sounds or repeat or get tangled up on words. With practice, we improve.

- Praise the child for sharing his ideas.
- Tell the child that stuttering
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does not bother you.

• Give the child opportunities to talk. Call on him to give an answer or ask him for his opinion.
• Let the child know it’s OK to stutter.

By talking to the child in this way, he or she learns that you are aware of his stuttering and that you accept it—and him.

The most important thing you can do when a child is stuttering is to be a good communicator.

• Keep eye contact and give the child enough time to finish speaking.
• Try not to fill in words or sentences.
• Let the child know by your manner and actions that you are listening to what she says—not how he or she says it.
• Model wait time—take two seconds before you answer a child’s question and insert more pauses into your own speech to help reduce time pressure.
• Do not make remarks like “slow down,” “take a deep breath,” “relax,” or “think about what you’re going to say, then say it.” We often say these things to children because they help us when we’re tripping over our words. Stuttering is a different kind of speaking problem, however, and this kind of advice is simply not helpful to the child who stutters.

Answering Questions
There are some things you can do to make it easier for a child who stutters when asking questions in class.

• Ask questions that can be answered with relatively few words until he or she adjusts to the class.
• If every child will be asked a question, find out if the child who stutters prefers to be called on earlier or later. Tension and worry can build up in some children when they have to wait their turn, or in others when they know they have to answer sooner than other children.
• Assure the entire class that they will have as much time as they need to answer questions, and that you want them to take the time to think through their answers before answering.

Reading Aloud/Oral reports
Most children who stutter are fluent when reading in unison with someone else. Rather than not calling on the child who stutters, let him have his turn reading along with another child. Let the whole class read in pairs at times, so that the child who stutters doesn’t feel “special.” Stutterers may gradually...
become more confident and able to read out loud on their own.

There are many things you can do to help make oral reports a positive experience for the child who stutters. Together, you and the child can develop a plan, considering factors such as:

- Order—Does he or she want to be one of the first to present, in the middle, or one of the last to present?
- Practice opportunities—Will the child be most comfortable practicing at home, with you, with a friend, or at a speech therapy session?
- Audience size—Should the oral report be given in private, in a small group, or in front of the entire class?
- Should the child be timed?
- Should grading criteria be modified?

Teasing

Deal with teasing of the child who stutters just as you would with any other child who is being teased.

- If the child becomes upset by teasing, talk with him or her one-on-one. Help the child to understand why others tease, and brainstorm for ways to respond.
- If certain children are picking on a classmate who stutters, talk to them alone and explain that teasing is unacceptable.
- If the problem persists, consult with a guidance counselor or social worker. They often have suggestions for managing teasing.

- Ask the child who stutters to make a classroom presentation about stuttering. (You will first need to discuss this idea with the child and consult with the child’s speech pathologist. Some children won’t mind if you talk to their peers about stuttering; others will feel that it is a private matter and should not be discussed openly.)

The presentation allows the child to teach her peers facts about stuttering, provide names of famous people who stutter, offer suggestions about how she would like her peers to react when she is stuttering, and even teach different ways to stutter.

If other children understand more about the problem, they are less likely to ridicule or tease the child who stutters.

Speech therapy

Unsure if your school has a speech pathologist? Talk to your building administrator. Also, suggest to the child’s parents that they enlist the help of a stuttering specialist who has a Certificate of Clinical Competence from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. The Stuttering Foundation of America offers free referrals at www.stutteringhelp.org, or call 800-992-9392.

Keep in mind that each child is different, and your caring, positive attitude will make a big difference.