

Childhood Dysfluency (Stuttering/Stammering) Myths and Facts

When I hear a parent ask, “My child has started stuttering/stammering; I am really worried. What should I do?”, I immediately focus on reassuring with information and advice. I focus on providing lots of helpful reassuring information with practical advice and tips. This article will be helpful information for yourself or someone you know who is concerned about a child who is experiencing this and give some practical tips and advice to know when to seek professional support.

What is Stammering?

Stuttering/Stammering: ** Note both words mean the same thing. The clinical word for it is dysfluency, and I will use them interchangeably in this article. Stammering is when connected speech is interrupted by hesitations, prolongations, repetitions or even blocks (getting stuck) preventing a person to produce speech that is fluent. When stammering is really severe, a person can struggle to complete sentences and also display secondary behaviours like twitches or ticks when result from an attempt to get fluency back.

What Causes Stammering?

The British Stammering Association says, “Research seems to suggest that a combination of factors is involved. Stammering is at root a neurological condition, based in the wiring of the brain. Studies have shown differences in the anatomy and functioning of the brain of those who stammer compared with most other people.”

Myth 1: Stuttering is part of normal language development

This is often thought to be the case because as professionals, we often say that it is something that is common during certain stages of language development. Just because it is common, does not mean it is a typical part of development. Normal or typical development happens gradually and generally a child increases language development and fluency of being able to speak along the same progression so there is no period of expected dysfluency. However, when children do stutter, it often begins during the stage when language is developing in the preschool years and is often noted to occur during bursts of language development as well as increasing demands within the environment. We will go into this in more detail later.

Myth 2: Stuttering is caused by talking to fast

When we hear someone stuttering, we often have a natural urge to encourage them to slow down as we feel this may help. Because of this, sometimes people draw the conclusion that the stuttering is caused by someone trying to speak too fast or “thinking faster than they can speak”. This is a natural response, but it is not based on the actual cause of stuttering which is actually not entirely known to date! While often a relaxation of the physiology which can involve slowing down can help increase fluency, it is not helpful to tell someone to slow down and in fact adds more pressure which is counterproductive. The causes of dysfluency are still highly theoretical and some say, “there are as many causes for stuttering as there are people who stutter.”- Dr. Joseph Attanasio, Montclair State University.

Myth 3: Stammering is Something You Can Grow Out of

This is often said to help reassure people that their child will not always be stuttering like they are now. There is some truth in this.

Obviously, some children of preschool age who begin to stutter do not develop into “confirmed” stutterers in their adult life. But this does not mean that they will all get better without treatment. Some people who have reportedly “grown out of stuttering” did in fact do something to help themselves or received help that worked for them. Our job as speech and language therapists is to ensure that the right information is out there and that all of those helping children to move through this difficulty are approaching it from a healthy and supportive perspective which will hopefully allow more children to stop stuttering long-term.

Myth 4: Stuttering Treatment means teaching your child to talk differently

This is not always the case. Often when children are preschool age, they are blissfully unaware of being dysfluent at all because they are still learning to speak and it is all part of their experience, so they have nothing to compare it to at the beginning. Some children will develop an awareness earlier than others that they are getting “stuck on their words” or that they can’t say what they want to say easily. This is where the problems start. Adults often want to help by giving instructions about what to do to make it stop. These are often based on Myth 2 so not exactly helpful. If you think about it, most adults giving instructions are not “stammerers” and may never have even experienced this, so we are unlikely to be able to be helpful from experience anyway. However, there are some things you can do to help without telling your child how to speak differently or slow down etc. Below I will explain some top tips for preschool children who begin to stutter.

Top Tips: What Can I Do to Help?

1. Give the gift of time: Wait for your child to finish, don’t rush them verbally or non-verbally. Give the impression you are happy and content to wait with your body language too.
2. Don’t Interrupt or Finish Their Sentence: Calmly reassure them that you will not abandon the conversation, interrupt them or try to finish what they are saying to get them out of a stuck moment. Do this silently with minimal verbal input; just leave them the space.
3. Eye contact: Look at your child to show you are listening.
4. Think about the environment, busy days happen, but valuing calm is supportive to fluent speech.
5. Prepare for change, life can be unpredictable so do your best to prepare for changes big and small just by talking about them ahead of time.
6. Ask for help: Don’t feel like you must do this on your own. Speech therapists are here to help, listen, evaluate, make suggestions and support you and your child through this stage so that it is as smooth as it can be. If needed, you may be offered specific therapy techniques such as behavioural approaches and fluency enhancing techniques. Do ask for help and advice from a professional so you can be empowered to help your child. Just like techniques for encouraging fluency, we can help you through the bumps!