



## Children who Stutter

Stuttering, which often begins at 3 or 4 years of age, can lead to severely impaired communication if not treated early. Children who stutter are at risk of developing emotional problems such as fear of meeting new people or speaking on the telephone.

### **Causes of Stuttering in Children**

There are many theories and popular beliefs about what causes stuttering. However, despite considerable scientific research from the second half of the 20th century onwards, the cause of the disorder remains a mystery. All we can say at the dawn of the 21st century is that stuttering is most likely due to some problem with the neural processing (brain activity) that underlies speech production.

### **Helping a Child Who Stutters**

There is a lot you can do as a parent or caregiver to help a child overcome a stutter.

1. Speak with your child in an unhurried way, pausing frequently. Wait a few seconds after your child finishes speaking before you begin to speak. Your own slow, relaxed speech will be far more effective than any criticism or advice such as "slow down" or "try it again slowly."
2. Reduce the number of questions you ask your child. Children speak more freely if they are expressing their own ideas rather than answering an adult's questions. Instead of asking questions, simply comment on what your child has said, thereby letting them know you heard them.
3. Use your facial expressions and other body language to convey to your child that you are listening to the content of their message and not to how they are talking.
4. Set aside a few minutes at a regular time each day when you can give your undivided attention to your child. During this time, let the child choose what they would like to do. Let them direct you in activities and decide themselves whether to talk or not. When you talk during this special time, use slow, calm, and relaxed speech, with plenty of pauses. This quiet, calm time can be a confidence-builder for younger children, letting them know that a parent enjoys their company. As the child gets older, it can be a time when the child feels comfortable talking about their feelings and experiences with a parent.
5. Help all members of the family learn to take turns talking and listening. Children, especially those who stutter, find it much easier to talk when there are few interruptions and they have the listeners' attention.
6. Observe the way you interact with your child. Try to increase those times that give your child the message that you are listening to them and that they have plenty of time to talk. Try to decrease criticisms, rapid speech patterns, interruptions, and questions.
7. Above all, convey that you accept your child as they are. The most powerful force will be your support, whether your child stutters or not.