

The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children

# Supporting pupils who stammer

Suggestions sheets

# Overview

These sheets give you a range of suggestions to cover different aspects of supporting a pupil who stammers. The ideas come from a study to elicit the views of pupils who stammer, their parents, and school staff. However, **every pupil will respond in their own way**, and the level of support they need may vary across time.

Ideally they will be used as a basis for teaching staff and pupils who stammer to discuss specific solutions to particular problems. Involving a speech & language therapist in this discussion too is a very good idea.

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# I. Frequently Asked Questions

The following are examples of frequently asked questions (FAQs) that education staff have asked us during sessions about stammering.

## I. What is stammering? What isn't stammering?

Stammering can take many forms. These are the most typical features:

- **Repetition of whole words**, e.g. "and, and, and then I left"
- **Repetition of single sounds**, e.g. "c-c-come h-h-here"
- **Prolonging of sounds**, e.g. "ssssssometimes I go out"
- **Blocking of sounds**, where the mouth is in position, but no sound comes out
- **Facial tension** - in the muscles around the eyes, nose, lips or neck
- **Extra body movements**, e.g. stamping feet, tapping fingers
- **The breathing pattern may be disrupted**, for example, the child may hold his breath while speaking or take an exaggerated breath before speaking

Sometimes the person who stammers adopts strategies to try to minimise or hide the problem, for example by avoiding or changing words – they may say 'I've forgotten what I was going to say', or may switch to another word when they begins to stammer, e.g. "I played with my br- br- br... my sister on Saturday". They may also avoid certain situations - for instance, speaking in assembly or asking questions in class.

**Hesitations can be a normal feature of speech.** Repeating phrases, restarting and using "um" and "er" are not usually considered to be stammering behaviours

## 2. Is there a difference between stuttering and stammering?

No, both words mean the same thing.

## 3. How many people have a stammer?

One percent of the adult population stammers. Five percent of people will have stammered at some time, which shows that many children recover from stammering, with some needing specialist help. Stammering is more common in boys than girls.

#### **4. What causes stammering?**

Stammering is thought to be caused by a slight difference in how the brain is wired. In young children, this wiring is still forming, which may be why many children recover from stammering. This is probably an inherited condition. About 80 percent of children who stammer have a family member who also stammers. Other factors may contribute to the onset and development of a stammer, such as the child's speech and language abilities and emotional factors, e.g. whether the child is highly sensitive or anxious. Aspects in the child's environment e.g. turn taking at home or in school, may also affect the child's fluency.

#### **5. When should I be concerned about a child's fluency?**

Many children go through a phase of non-fluency, particularly during their language-learning years. If the child has been stammering for more than a year, the stammering is not improving, there is an adult relative who stammers, or he is male, the child is more likely to continue to stammer, and it is best to seek help (see below). In any case, if the child or parent is anxious about the stammering they should be encouraged to seek help.

#### **6. Is there a cure?**

Early intervention with young children has been found to be most effective. Therapy for older children and teenagers aims to reduce the impact of the stammer on the young person's life by helping them to find strategies to control the stammering, by building their confidence and by helping them to manage their thoughts and feelings about themselves and their stammer.

#### **7. What situations cause people to stammer more and why?**

Stammering can be very variable and there may be periods of fluency. There are some situations that people who stammer typically find more challenging and others that are easier. However, everybody is an individual and there are no hard and fast rules.

People who stammer may be more fluent when they are feeling calm and unhurried with familiar people who know that they stammer. They can usually sing without stammering.

They may stammer more in stressful situations like speaking to strangers or authority figures, or talking in a group. They often find situations such as classroom presentations or discussions more challenging and it can be quite hard for many of them to be 'put on the spot', for example reading aloud or answering the register.

#### **8.1. How should we react when someone stammers?**

It is helpful to react as 'normally' as possible. Continue to listen to the person, be interested in what they have to say, maintain eye contact (without staring) and give them time to finish.

## **8.2. What not to do?**

People who stammer tell us that it is less helpful to be given direct advice about their speech since they typically know what to do but may be struggling to do it. They often ask to be given time to finish for themselves, and they generally do not like to have their sentences finished. They prefer not being told to hurry up, slow down, or take a deep breath.

## **9. Should we allow pupils who stammer to opt out of things they find difficult?**

While we want pupils to 'have a go' and not let their stammer hold them back, they may need support to build the confidence to do this. It is helpful to ask the pupil one-to-one about how to respond to their stammer and manage the speaking situations they find difficult.

## **10. What help is available?**

Your local speech and language therapy service should be able to help. Please find out how to contact them via your local NHS Trust.

For additional information on stammering contact either:

### **The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children**

Telephone: 020 7530 4238

Email: [stammering.information@islingtonpct.nhs.uk](mailto:stammering.information@islingtonpct.nhs.uk)

Website: [www.stammeringcentre.org](http://www.stammeringcentre.org)

or

### **The British Stammering Association**

Telephone: 020 8983 1003

Website: [www.stammering.org](http://www.stammering.org)

## 2. How to respond to a pupil who stammers

You may want to use a number of questions to find out what the pupil would like you to do:

- What do you find helpful at the moment when you stammer?
- What is not helpful?
- What would you like me to do or say when you are stammering?

It is also important to check these ideas from time to time, since they are not 'set in stone'.

*"I'd like my teachers and my school life to know what causes stammering and what emotions I feel when I'm stammering."*

- Children are the experts in their own stammer. It is much better to **ask** about the stammer than hide a lack of understanding.

*"What I would really like my teachers to do is come over to me and have a little talk."*

- While the pupil is talking, **maintain eye contact** and try to focus on what they are saying, rather than on how they are saying it. Whilst waiting for them to finish try to appear relaxed and make sure your body language is not giving them a signal to hurry up.

*"Teachers help because they look at me when I'm speaking."*

- You may **reassure** the pupil if necessary, but avoid telling them what to do (e.g. stop, slow down, take a breath, hurry up) because it tends to increase pressure on them.

*"They, like, tell me 'slow down' and stuff like that and I don't really like being told to slow down 'coz I think I speak quite slowly anyway."*

*"Sometimes they try to help me in a bad way like 'hurry up with your sentence."*

- You may need to **slow down** your own speech, or pause to think, to give a helpful model to the pupil.
- If the pupil wants, you may gently acknowledge the issue, e.g. "I can see that was hard for you, but you kept going," but don't make a big deal out of it.
- Give **positive encouragement or praise** to the pupil who stammers, (not necessarily just about their speech), but don't treat them in a way that is obviously different from their peers.

### 3. Supporting the pupil who stammers in class

Below is a list of ways to support a pupil who stammers in the classroom:

- Give the pupil who stammers plenty of **time to answer/speak/read**  
*"My friend who really cares about my stutter always remembers to give me time."*
- Encourage **'thinking time'** before pupils speak
- Model a **relaxed, slow style of speaking** and establish a calm classroom environment
- Ensure **pupils take turns** and don't get rewarded for calling out
- Make sure pupils put their hands down when someone is speaking, listen to each other and don't interrupt or make comments whilst others are speaking
- It may be easier for the pupil who stammers to indicate when they are ready to speak. They may want to **volunteer** or they may prefer you to pick them
- Moving down the rows or giving set lines to be said at a particular time (e.g. during the register) can add pressure, as can speaking at the end of a lesson when classmates are eager to leave. Giving pupils who stammer early turns or adopting a random style of turn selection can help
- **Encourage everyone to contribute** in class. A hierarchy for reading / speaking tasks can help those who stammer feel able to contribute. Begin with short spoken contributions to a small audience of familiar faces, if necessary allowing pupils to read / answer in unison. Then increase the length of contributions, and/or the size or familiarity of the audience  
*"Don't not ask them anything 'coz I think that that perhaps is isolating them a bit."*  
*"I always noticed that the teachers used to give me shortened paragraphs and that was nice of them because it slowly helped to build my confidence."*
- **Be aware** that pupils who stammer sometimes hide their difficulty by not contributing, pretending they do not know, asking to be excused or playing the clown.
- Pupils who stammer will have the same aspirations as their peers, so if they want to take part in an activity e.g. a role in a play or giving a presentation, **don't let others prevent them.**
- As a stammer can be variable, some days the pupil may prefer not to speak. This is something to **negotiate** rather than be encouraged long term.

## 4. Supporting the pupil who stammers in class: difficult situations

### 1. Answering the register

Allow a range of responses, such as, “yes,” “here,” “present,” etc. Pupils could respond by putting their hand up or showing name badges. Put the pupil who stammers earlier rather than later.

### 2. Reading aloud in class

Reading in unison with another person usually helps a pupil who stammers. For paired reading choose a partner who is easy-going and patient. It may help to tell the pupil which part they will read beforehand so they have time to practise, however this may make some people more anxious.

### 3. Answering questions in class

Give the pupil who stammers the chance to tell you whether or not they know the answer. Be aware of silent blocking (where a pupil is stammering but no sound is coming out). Ask one question at a time rather than several at once. The pupil who stammers may prefer to volunteer when he wants to answer, rather than having a question directed at him.

### 4. Classroom discussions

Encourage the pupil who stammers to participate in discussions. Small group or pairs may be easier than whole class discussions. Agree on a signal for the pupil to give when they are ready to contribute.

### 5. Oral presentations

It may be easier if the presentation is made to a smaller group. Give plenty of warning and opportunities to practise. Speak to the pupil who stammers privately about the presentation so that he/she feels supported.

### 6. Oral exams

Find out about extra time allocation for pupils who stammer as the anxiety of doing an oral exam often affects their fluency. Extra time can be considered by the exam board when supported by a letter from a Speech & Language Therapist. Speak to the pupil who stammers privately so that he/she feels supported and give plenty of warning and opportunities to practise.



## 5. Dealing with teasing and bullying of children who stammer

Many pupils experience teasing or bullying and tell us that they encounter **negative reactions** such as laughter when they stammer. They may also feel more isolated. The most common forms of bullying reported are **name-calling and imitation of stammering**. Subtle reactions such as pupils making faces or smiling when a classmate stammers can be just as difficult.

- Teachers may need to ask pupils about what is happening in and out of the classroom
- There are many useful resources about teasing and bullying available to help you and your pupil cope with this problem. Check out your own school's bullying policy
- Watch out for times when teasing may happen, e.g. breaks, lunchtime, and look out for signs of bullying. Ask other staff to report anything to you as soon as possible
- Even remarks that are intended as light-hearted can be upsetting to some pupils who stammer  
*"If someone asked me what my name was and I took a long time and they said 'have you forgotten it,' even as a joke, I might get a bit upset because of my stammer."*
- It helps to establish that we are all different, and for teachers to explain to other pupils about stammering, as this may reduce bullying of children who stammer. The child may wish to help tell their schoolmates about it  
*"I am slightly different to everyone else 'coz I have a stammer, but then everybody is different in their own way."*
- You could help your pupil to find ways to respond to people who do tease him/her. The whole class could work out solutions to bullying together  
*"When I was in primary school I remember that someone was making fun of me and I wasn't quite sure what to do, but now if I was asked how come I talk like this I find it better to tell someone, because then they know about it and then if I still stammer then they know and they know how to deal with it."*
- Praise, encouragement, and role-play can increase self-esteem and assertiveness, which can help the pupil to deal with teasing and bullying
- If the pupil seems to be socially isolated, consider where he/she sits in the classroom. Consider having a 'playground team' made up of responsible, caring pupils, who will include more vulnerable pupils in games  
*"I had to try reasonably hard to make friends because of my speech."*

## 6. Liaison

Liaison between parents of pupils who stammer, education staff and the speech and language therapist is vital to ensure a consistent approach. It is important to meet regularly in order to keep up to date with a pupil's progress and the level of support needed at that time.

- It is helpful for a teacher to meet with the pupil's **Speech and Language Therapist** and parents to make sure that the child's school, home and therapy are working along the same lines
- Pupils who stammer may underperform in school, especially if they are unwilling to ask for help or contribute in class. Their progress should be closely monitored, and discussed with their parents  
*"I haven't told my teacher about my stammering because I'm quite scared to."*
- Parents may want to discuss their child's social integration at school

Remember to **talk to the pupil**, as they are the most likely to know what they need. The 'Pupil planning sheet' is a good basis for your discussion. If the pupil is not receiving speech and language therapy, and you (or they) are concerned about their stammering, you should refer them to a speech and language therapist (with parental permission).

*"I think speech therapy is very important because it helps me feel better."*



### The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children

Finsbury Health Centre, Pine Street, London EC1R 0LP

Telephone: 020 7530 4238 Email: [stammering.information@islingtonpct.nhs.uk](mailto:stammering.information@islingtonpct.nhs.uk)

Website: [www.stammeringcentre.org](http://www.stammeringcentre.org)

### The British Stammering Association

Telephone: 020 8983 1003 Website: [www.stammeringineducation.net](http://www.stammeringineducation.net)

# 7. Pupil Planning Sheet

## Ways I would like to be supported in school

Pupil's name

Year

How to respond when I stammer

Answering the register

Reading aloud in class

Answering questions in class

Classroom discussions and oral presentations

Oral examinations

Dealing with teasing and bullying

Meetings between my school, parents, and speech & language therapist

Agreed by Pupil:

Teacher:

Agreed on:

Review on:

Please circulate to: