

Supporting a Child Who Stutters

A guide for parents and caregivers

Stuttering (also called stammering) is common in young children — about 1 in 12 children stutter at some point. Most (about 75–80%) recover naturally, often within 12–18 months of onset. How you respond in those early months can make a real difference to your child's confidence and enjoyment of communication.

What stuttering looks like

Stuttering is more than just repetitions. You might notice:

- Repeating sounds, syllables, or words ("c-c-cat", "I I I want")
- Getting stuck or "blocked" — mouth opens but no sound comes out
- Stretching sounds ("ssssun")
- Tension in the face, jaw, or neck while speaking
- Avoiding words, giving up on sentences, or avoiding speaking situations

What to do — helpful strategies

Give them time:

Wait patiently while your child finishes their sentence. Avoid finishing sentences for them — this sends a message that you don't have time for what they want to say.

Slow your own speech down:

Speak at a relaxed, unhurried pace. You don't need to say "slow down" — modelling slow speech is more powerful, and much less stressful for your child.

Maintain calm eye contact:

Keep a relaxed, attentive expression while they talk. Avoid looking away or looking anxious — your face tells them whether talking is safe and enjoyable.

Respond to the message, not the stutter:

Comment on what they said, not how they said it. "Wow, a red dinosaur!" rather than "Good job, you said that without stuttering."

Create low-pressure moments:

Read together, tell stories, talk during low-demand play. Reduce rapid-fire questions and give your child time to be the talker without pressure to perform.

Acknowledge when they bring it up:

If your child says "I can't talk right," try: "Sometimes words are hard to get out — that happens to lots of people. I love hearing what you have to say."

Things to avoid

- Saying "slow down", "take a breath", or "start again" — this increases pressure and self-consciousness
- Finishing their sentences or filling in words for them
- Showing visible worry, frustration, or impatience
- Avoiding situations where they have to talk (this can teach avoidance)
- Drawing other people's attention to the stutter

- Rewarding fluent speech or making stuttered speech a focus of praise

When to seek a speech-language therapy assessment

- Stuttering has lasted more than 6–12 months with no sign of improvement
- The stutter started after age 3.5, or is getting more severe over time
- Your child is becoming distressed, avoiding speaking, or is being teased
- There is a family history of persistent stuttering
- You are worried at all — trust your instincts. Early assessment is always the right call.