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Stuttering and the Pressure of Thought

There is a common stage of language development, most often seen between 2 and 4, called "normal dysfluency". During this stage children will be heard to have pauses, stammers, and noticeable difficulties in speaking smoothly and freely. It can be especially obvious when the child is starting to use sentences. Dysfluency occurs when the child's ability to speak can't keep up with the flow of thoughts, a situation known as "pressure of thought." It's not usually a sign of future stammering or other speech problems, and will eventually pass.

If you think about all your child has to learn in order to speak clearly - new speech sounds, new words, making sentences - it is no wonder that she stumbles over words more often than adults or older children do. Be reassured by the fact that the majority of children who stammer at some stage during their childhood do not go on to become adult stutterers.

There are lots of positive things you can do to help your child through this stage of normal dysfluency:

- **Listen:** Try to listen to what she is saying rather than how she is saying it. Sometimes, if we are anxious about a child's speech, we pay more attention when she is not fluent than when she is fluent.

- **Be a good speech model:** Children can't speak as fast as adults, but they sometimes try. If you make a conscious effort to slow down your speech, your child will copy you and slow down also. When she slows down, she is more in control and thus more fluent. Slowing down your own speech is not the same as telling your child to slow down or speak more slowly. A young child does not realize that she can control the speed of her speech, so she will be unable to consciously slow down. Just remember, kids learn how to talk from their parents. If you slow down, she will slow down as well.

- **Read or tell stories:** Do this regularly and frequently. You don't have to spend 30 minutes at a time - a regular 5 to 10 minutes is better than a rare marathon. Once you have read the same favorite story many times, let your child finish some of the sentences, or tell the story in her own words. Keep reading/telling stories even if she doesn't want to talk. Read slowly and clearly. As well as improving her fluency, you are also helping her general language development and future reading skills.

- **Be patient:** Resist the temptation to finish your child's sentences and overcorrect her mistakes. This will only increase her tension.

- **Be sensitive:** It's true that emotions play a part in speech fluency. Kids are sensitive, and tend to feel stressed in new situations.. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can make for tougher parenting, as well as for a bit more stammering. This doesn't mean, however, that you need to remove all situations where she can become frustrated. She should still be allowed to toilet train, to go to new places, and to meet new people and situations. These things are all important to her development, and if she stammers more in new situations, that doesn't necessarily mean that she is being pushed. It just means that she is feeling a bit more stress, and her dysfluency increases as her stress level does. Help her to talk about her feelings - young children can be overwhelmed by their emotions and feel out of control. Giving them names for feelings, and talking about why they are feeling that way, helps. For example, "You are fed up because we spent so long at the supermarket", "You are angry because you are not allowed sweets before dinner". Talk about your own feelings also, and try to control your own displays of anger and frustration. In this way she will be able to say how she feels because she knows the words, and know that you will accept her feelings. The idea is to allow your child to develop a feeling of control over her emotions.

When is normal dysfluency not "normal"? A speech therapist is trained to tell the difference between normal dysfluency and stammering. So when should you bring your child to a speech therapist? It's best to seek professional advice if:

- Your child regularly tries to avoid saying certain words, or substitutes or inserts irrelevant or meaningless words and noises in her effort to say a word.

- You see repeated signs of tremor in the muscles around the mouth when your child is trying to get a word out.

- You hear a frequent rise in pitch or loudness in a sound when she tries to get a word out.



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