

Advice for School Staff - How to Help a Child who Stammers

(Extracts from The British Stammering Association)

Find out what the pupil wants: Talk to them privately. Discuss with the child how to deal with free-for-all questions, discussion sessions and answering the register. Give the pupil time to answer the register - try taking names out of sequence and call the pupil's name early.

Encourage participation with support: Find out which speaking situations the child finds challenging and encourage them to take small steps to participate in them e.g. if the aim is answering a question in class, practise answering easy questions in a small group first. Track the student's progress and offer praise for their achievements.

Find out about previous and current therapy. Speak to the parents and the pupil and/or contact the pupil's Speech and Language Therapist for further information and advice.

Avoid any approach that singles out the child who stammers: Speaking slowly yourself to all pupils creates a feeling of unhurried calm. If you remain calm, kind and approachable the chances are you will support the child through the difficulties. If you are anxious this may fuel the child's anxiety, making things harder for you both.

Develop the child's confidence: Create a relaxed environment where the child feels safe to practise speaking. Many dysfluent children feel very frustrated that their speech hampers them.

Some situations increase a stammer: being interrupted or hurried; competing to speak; fear of the consequences of what's been said; expressing complex ideas; using relatively new vocabulary and sentence structures.

Always show you are listening by keeping natural eye contact and not displaying embarrassment.

Comment on the importance of what they have said, demonstrating that you value them for what they say, not how they say it.

Increase the child's sense of self worth by encouragement, giving them useful tasks and praising past efforts.

Encourage the child's participation:

Support the child to join in all activities but always provide an opt-out for a child who really cannot cope with speaking in class.

Do not rule out a child's possible interest in participating in drama, singing or morning assembly activities as performance can lift someone out of themselves and alleviate their stammer - notably, some of the world's most celebrated actors, singers and public speakers have a stammer which leaves them when they don't have to be themselves.

Some speaking situations facilitate fluency - speaking with another; reciting familiar lists like the days of the week or counting; singing; familiar nursery rhymes or poetry.

Sometimes acting allows the child to speak confidently and fluently. In general, familiar material that is well within the child's level of ability reduces the communicative stress.

If the pupil consents and is receiving therapy, encourage them to gain confidence at speaking to small groups, starting with twos, then building up, to the whole class.

When asking whole class questions try not to keep the child who stammers waiting long for their turn. This can increase anxiety and stammering.

A child who stammers may find it very difficult to initiate conversations with adults and may be too embarrassed to discuss their stammer or problems with work. Provide opportunities to get to know the child and to discuss stammering sensitively.

Reading aloud:

A classroom policy that encourages a relaxed reading pace may help, or reading in unison with another child will assist fluency.

For those with good / bad days, reserve the option for them to read aloud on their better days. It may be necessary to work gradually towards reading in front of the class: reading alone to the teacher can be followed by reading in small groups. When the child feels ready, reading to the class can be attempted. Similarly, work steadily from reading aloud just one sentence, towards whole paragraphs and eventually whole pages.

