

Stuttering

What Is Stuttering?

Many young kids go through a stage between the ages of 2 and 5 when they stutter. This might make them:

- repeat certain syllables, words, or phrases
- prolong them
- stop, making no sound for certain sounds and syllables

Stuttering is a form of **dysfluency** (dis-FLOO-en-see), an interruption in the flow of speech.

In many cases, stuttering goes away on its own by age 5. In some kids, it goes on for longer. Effective treatments are available to help a child overcome it.

What Causes Stuttering?

Doctors and scientists aren't completely sure why some kids stutter. But most believe that a few things contribute to it, such as a problem with the way the brain's messages interact with the muscles and body parts needed for speaking.

Many believe that stuttering may be genetic. Kids who stutter are three times more likely to have a close family member who also stutters, or did.

What Are the Signs of Stuttering?

The first signs of stuttering tend to appear when a child is about 18–24 months old. At this age, there's a burst in vocabulary and kids are starting to put words together to form sentences. To parents, the stuttering may be upsetting and frustrating, but it is natural for kids to do some stuttering at this stage. Be as patient with your child as possible.

A child may stutter for a few weeks or several months, and the stuttering may come and go. Most kids who begin stuttering before the age of 5 stop without any need for help such as speech or language therapy.

But if your child's stuttering happens a lot, gets worse, or happens along with body or facial movements, seeing a speech-language therapist around age 3 is a good idea.

Usually, stuttering lets up when kids enter elementary school and start sharpening their communication skills. A school-age child who continues to stutter is likely aware of the problem and may be embarrassed by it. Classmates and friends may draw attention to it or even tease the child.

If this happens with your child, talk to the teacher, who can address this in the classroom with the kids. The teacher also might decrease the number of stressful speaking situations for your child until speech therapy begins.

When to Get Help

If your child is 5 years old and still stuttering, talk to your doctor or a speech-language therapist. Check with a speech therapist if your child:

- tries to avoid situations that require talking
- changes a word for fear of stuttering
- has facial or body movements along with the stuttering
- repeats whole words and phrases often and consistently
- repeats sounds and syllables more often
- has speech that sounds very strained

Also talk to the therapist if:

- you notice increased facial tension or tightness in your child's speech muscles
- you notice vocal tension that causes rising pitch or loudness
- you have other concerns about your child's speech

Most schools will offer testing and appropriate therapy if stuttering lasts for 6 months or more.

How Can Parents Help?

Try these steps to help your child:

- Don't require your child to speak precisely or correctly at all times. Let talking be fun and enjoyable.
- Use family meals as a conversation time. Avoid distractions such as radio or TV.
- Avoid corrections or criticisms such as "slow down," "take your time," or "take a deep breath." These comments, however well-intentioned, will only make your child feel more self-conscious.
- Avoid having your child speak or read aloud when uncomfortable or when the stuttering increases. Instead, during these times encourage activities that do not require a lot of talking.
- Don't interrupt your child or tell them to start over.
- Don't tell your child to think before speaking.
- Provide a calm atmosphere in the home. Try to slow down the pace of family life.
- Speak slowly and clearly when talking to your child or others in their presence.
- Maintain eye contact with your child. Try not to look away or show signs of being upset.
- Let your child speak for themselves and to finish thoughts and sentences. Pause before responding to your child's questions or comments.
- Talk slowly to your child. This takes practice! Modeling a slow rate of speech will help with your child's fluency.

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