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Dysfluency/Stuttering

Tips for parents/educators, in helping students who are experiencing increased dysfluency.

Preface: A certain amount of dysfluency is typical for young children (preschoolers) to exhibit, as their language/cognitive abilities expand at an enormous rate during the ages of two years to five years of age; however, when these episodes increase, there are strategies which parents/educators may employ to help lessen the tension on the preschooler as follows:

- **Analyze the child's day i.e., document dysfluent episodes (how often, during what activities, and where) to determine if there is a pattern-a specific setting, time of day, in which the demands of the child may be related to the level of dysfluency; share this information with your speech therapist.**
- **Analyze and document the type of errors (what kind of errors) the child is exhibiting i.e., are they partial word i.e., sssnake; and/or whole word i.e., but...but...but; are there facial grimaces/posturing during any of the episodes; share this information with your speech therapist.**
- ***Slow down* your rate of speech.**
- **Obtain eye contact first before speaking with the child i.e., do not speak across the room.**
- **Get down on their eye level when conversing.**
- ***Be careful* of your body language/facial expressions during dysfluent episodes.**
- **Offer extended "pause time" between phrases/sentences to allow time for child to "break into" the conversation.**
- **Decrease verbal demands i.e., the amount of questioning on the child, whenever possible.**
- **Parents/siblings/teachers DO NOT INTERRUPT the child and/or FILL-IN information for the child when he/she is having difficulty i.e., taking too long.**
- **Parents should not blame themselves, parents/siblings/teachers can exacerbate the problem by using ineffective strategies; however, they can not cause the problem i.e., "dust bunnies" under the bed of a child with asthma.**
- **Use shorter, concise directives.**
- **Do not draw attention to the stuttering by telling him/her to "slow down", etc... But rather, encourage him/her to continue speaking when he/she is aware of the stuttering by not making an issue of the episode, and focusing your attention of what he/she did say while continuing to the conversation.**

- **Joint book reading provides a "routine-pattern" in which each contribute to the interaction in predictable ways; thus promoting opportunities for successful verbal discourse i.e., use Dr. Seuss type books (highly predictive/repetitive stories which offer many 1-2 syllable words).**
- **DO NOT FOCUS IN ON SOUNDS IN ISOLATION i.e., correcting articulation errors with a student who is experiencing dysfluencies. Most childhood articulation errors are often out grown; whereas, stuttering may be a life-long battle!**
- Breathing techniques
- Slow and steady speech



Parent Practice for Easy Talking

Many children benefit when their parents and others use a slower, more relaxed pace and manner of speaking. A slower rate makes it easier for children to understand their parents, and it increases their ability to learn from parents' language models.

For children who stutter, a slower parental rate can often help them to speak more easily and more fluently – even if the child's own speaking rate does not appear to change.

When parents use a slower speaking rate, this also helps to reduce the *time pressures* their children may feel to speak quickly ("I need to get out everything I want to say before my turn is up or before people become impatient with my stuttering.") This also gives children more time to plan what they want to say. This helps to improve overall communication.

TIPS for using a slower speaking rate:

- 1) Try to maintain natural intonation and phrasing. Don't stretch out words or use a "sing-song" voice.
- 2) Use some pauses between words, but mostly pauses between *phrases*. You can try to take at least one breath in each sentence to help you remember to pause.
- 3) Wait for a little under one second before beginning to speak when responding to the child's questions or comments.
- 4) Practice by reading sentences and talking with other adults before trying it with your child – slowing your speaking rate and phrasing can be difficult, but with practice, you can do it to help improve your child's speech.

Here are some practice sentences to help you get a feel for slowing, phrasing, and pausing:

- When we get home // you can have a snack.
- Would you like to read // a book before bed?
- When we finish dinner // you can go outside.
- I will pick you up // after school.
- This toy // looks like it will be fun // to play with.
- We need to run some errands // on the way to the park.

Remember, with practice, you can do it!

Some things to focus on to help your child speak more easily:

- **Use Easy Talking** at slowed rate...
use phrased talking to keep it natural
- **Reduce Your Overall Pace** by slowing your speaking rate slightly and including pauses at natural places in your sentences
- **Reduce Communication Time Pressures** by modifying "rapid-fire" questions. Try indirect requests like "I wonder..." "Maybe..." or "I think"
- **Repeat and Rephrase** both fluent and disfluent speech to provide a good model and let your child know you are listening

Suggestions for Modifying "Rapid-Fire" or Demanding Questions

One way parents can reduce the time pressures a child may feel is by reducing "rapid-fire" or frequent questions. It is important to recognize that the questions themselves do not cause the child to stutter. Some children, however, experience increased difficulty with speech fluency when they are required to respond to frequent questions.

Of course, parents still want to encourage their children to speak and participate in conversation. Here are some ways parents can encourage their children to talk without placing additional demands on them to answer complicated questions. These "non-question starters" or "indirect requests" invite the children to speak on their own schedule. Indirect requests can also stimulate language development without contributing to communicative stressors that may affect fluency.

"I wonder..."

"I think..."

"I bet..."

"I guess..."

"Maybe..."

"It looks like..."

Parents can also use more complicated non-question starters as the child grows...and they can develop their own, keeping in mind that the goal is to *invite* the child to talk without *requiring* that the child talk.

"Let's see if..."

"Why don't we try..."

Parents do not have to use these starters *every* time they want to interact with their child. When the child is experiencing difficulty with fluency, or when the child seems reluctant to talk, parents can try these and other ways of encouraging the child to talk without increasing the demands the child experiences.

Some Suggestions for Families of Young Children who Stutter

Stuttering occurs when a child has difficulty producing smooth, flowing speech. Stuttering appears to be related to many different but related causes, and a child's tendency to be disfluent in a given situation can be triggered by a wide variety of factors. One way to think about the problem is in terms of the specific stressors the child experiences, and how these stressors interact with the child's innate abilities for maintaining fluent speech. Examples of stressors include the way people in the child's environment react to the stuttering, the communication model the child hears, and the time pressures the child experiences for producing speech in a rapid and precise fashion. Stressors can also come from within the child. For example, a child may be more sensitive or reactive to the environment, or the child may have perfectionistic tendencies. Together, the child's innate abilities and the child's environment contribute to the situation where the child's speech fluency may be more likely to break down.

Some of the following suggestions may help children speak more easily by reducing the stressors a child feels when communicating. Some of these suggestions are directly related to speaking or listening behaviors, and some are related to more general family routines.

1. Family members should become aware of the overall *pace* of their conversations. If necessary, they can reduce their pace by slightly slowing their speaking rate or increasing the pauses between words and speaking turns (see item #2 below). This reduced pace will minimize time pressures the child may experience, and also provide a model of easy communication that the child can learn to follow when he is having difficulty maintaining fluent speech.
2. Parents should consistently pause for a little less than a second before responding to the child's questions or comments. This technique demonstrates to the child that it is okay to "take one's time" to formulate an answer. It also gives the child permission not to rush into responding before he or she is ready.
3. Parents can try to reduce time pressures the child may experience due to frequent, demanding questions. These questions can be replaced with more indirect requests, comments, or observations. This strategy allows the child to continue to participate in the conversation without being required to respond to frequent demands for speaking.
4. Family members can reduce requests for "performance" or "demand" speech. The child should not be required to speak when he wishes to be quiet. For example, he may smile or wave in greeting or hold up his fingers to indicate his age, rather than be required to use words if he does not want to. Also, performances, such as reciting poems for family members, should be minimized when the child is not comfortable talking in such situations.
5. Listeners should make a conscious effort to listen to *what* the child is saying, rather than the way the child is saying it. Corrective feedback about speaking rate, smoothness of talking, grammar or articulation errors, etc., can be made indirectly by repeating all or part of the child's utterance. This acknowledges the content of the child's speech rather than criticizing the child's manner of speaking.
6. Family members should take turns when talking. Interruptions should be reduced or eliminated, in both adult-child and adult-adult conversation, to minimize time pressures the child may feel. Remember, parents are the role models.
7. Parents should acknowledge and respect the ideas and feelings of their child. Although a parent may not agree with their child's opinions, the child should still have the right to express them.
8. Parents can review any family routines and reduce or eliminate unnecessary pressure about tasks and deadlines. This helps to further reduce time pressures the child may experience.
9. Children benefit when parents are consistent in setting appropriate limits and in dealing with misbehavior. Enforcing such boundaries adds safety to a child's world and may reduce stressors that affect fluency.
10. Above all, a child needs positive attention from his parents, as well as appreciation and pleasure in daily accomplishments – even small and routine ones.

By keeping these suggestions in mind, you can facilitate your child's development of more fluent speech and support the clinician's work in therapy. Together, you can make a difference for your child!