



Toddler Stuttering: Hope and Help

by Dr. Jenn Berman

Some time between the ages of 30 months and five years, many children start having trouble speaking fluently. The technical term, which many speech experts use for this development, is "language issue dysfluency." Non-fluency typically takes place when your child is experiencing a big developmental leap in language skills. His thoughts are happening faster than his ability to recall the proper word so he gets "stuck" on one word or syllable and repeats it over and over until he is able to complete the sentence. It can sound a lot like

stuttering and can cause panic in an already anxious parent.

Unlike stuttering, where the child typically gets stuck on the first sound in the word ("d-d-d-d-dog") or opens his mouth to speak and nothing comes out, children with non-fluency will often pause as if they are searching for the word or repeat the first word (i.e. "the-the-the dog was at the park") or first syllable ("The wa-wa-water is cold"). This condition can be exacerbated by exhaustion, excitement or just being upset.

Stuttering

True stuttering only affects 5 percent of children and according to pediatric speech pathologist, Patricia McAleer-Hamaguchi, it is very unusual in toddlers. It is often accompanied by secondary behaviors such as:

- 1) Physical movements in an attempt to get the words out - like putting a hand to the mouth or patting the leg.
- 2) Increased facial movements - like excessive blinking, indicating the child is struggling to speak.
- 3) Consistent insertion of unnecessary words - such as "um," "like," "so," or "ah."
- 4) Word substitution - especially when the chosen word is less appropriate.

Early Intervention

While about 4 percent of children will experience stuttering for six months, many will recover by late childhood, and only about 25 percent of those affected will develop severe chronic stuttering. If you think that your child may be stuttering, early intervention is key. There

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what is actually happening in the child's brain that
makes him/her behave this way, and
how can I help my child?

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is no harm in getting a child evaluated, whereas, there can be harm in waiting. A parent can miss an important window of opportunity to deal with his or her child's stuttering when it is most treatable. Even toddlers can learn strategies that will reduce stuttering.

When looking for qualified help, the first place most people go is their pediatrician. However, most parents will ultimately want to meet with a pediatric speech pathologist as well. Peds can be a great resource for both information and referrals. Another great resource is the Stuttering Foundation at www.stutteringhelp.org. You should meet and interview different pathologists to make sure that the one you choose is a good fit with your child in terms of approach, philosophy and personality. Good speech therapy should be fun for a child.

What Parents Can Do to Help

According to the Stuttering Foundation there are seven things parents can do to help:

1. Speak with your child in an unhurried way, pausing frequently.
2. Reduce the number of questions

you ask your child.

3. Use your facial expressions and other body language to convey to your child that you are listening to the content of her message and not to how she's talking.

4. Set aside a few minutes at a regular time each day when you can give your undivided attention to your child.

5. Help all members of the family learn to take turns talking and listening.

6. Observe the way you interact with your child.

7. Above all, convey that you accept your child as he is.

*Dr. Jenn is a Marriage, Family and Child Therapist in private practice. She is the author of the Los Angeles Times best selling book *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids* which won the Mom's Choice Award gold medal in parenting. Her "Dr. Jenn" column won the prestigious Parenting Publications of America award in parenting and child development. She has appeared as a psychological expert on hundreds of television shows including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Today Show*, *The Early Show*, and *The Tyra Banks Show*. She is also the owner of an eco-friendly clothing line for children and adults called *Retail Therapy* (ShopRetailTherapy.net). Dr. Jenn lives*



in Los Angeles with her husband and twin daughters. For more information on Dr. Jenn go to www.DoctorJenn.com.

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