

Commonly Asked Questions: Childhood Stuttering¹

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What do actor James Earl Jones, football and baseball player Bo Jackson, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill all have in common? Are you surprised to hear that they have all had stuttering problems? It's true, and these famous individuals share their problem with more than three million Americans.

What is stuttering?

Stuttering is a disorder of speech rhythm in which the speaker knows what he or she wants to say, but has difficulty because of uncontrolled repetition, prolongation (making the word longer), or cessation (stopping of sound). Most people think of stuttering as getting stuck and repeating or holding on the first sound of a word. That's only part of the story. Many people who stutter learn to use “filler” words or sounds such as “uhmm,” “ok,” or “err” to help them get through stuttering points. Approximately one out of every one hundred people in the United States stutter, and boys are four times more likely to stutter than girls.

What causes stuttering?

While researchers don't know the exact cause of stuttering, there is some evidence to suggest four factors can contribute to stuttering: genes, child development problems, neurological issues, and stress. Stuttering probably happens when someone has several of these factors, so the reason(s) for stuttering might be different for each person. Also, what causes the stuttering initially might be different from what cause the stuttering to continue and/or get worse.

Researchers are quick to point out that someone who stutters is not different from someone who doesn't stutter in terms of emotional or psychological make-up. Unfortunately, despite what this research shows, people who stutter are often labeled as nervous or slow. It's often these labels that cause a child who stutters to be insecure and, in turn, have problems in school.

What are the signs?

Do you think that you know a child who may have a stuttering problem? Be careful. Some adults over-interpret the normal speech mistakes associated

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1. This document is FCS 2120, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: June 1997. Revised: February 28, 2006 This publication was adapted from: The Pacesetter (May, 1996). *Stuttering: Frequently Asked Questions and Answers* (fact sheet). [www:wicksp@ideal.net.au](http://www.wicksp@ideal.net.au) and CBS News (May 2, 1996). *Helping a Child Who Stutters*. Parenting Points, <http://uttm.com/parent/topics>. Please visit the EDIS Website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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with learning to talk as stuttering. It is important to realize that children go through a normal phase in which they have some speech difficulties, so don't panic right away! About 20% of children go through a phase of speech problems that are problematic enough to seek assistance. Most children with stuttering problems will begin showing signs by the time they are five-years-old. Here are some warning signs for stuttering:

- Multiple repetitions of sounds. For example, “d-d-d-d-daddy.”
- Multiple “part-word” repetitions. For example, “da-da-daaaddy.”
- Repeatedly inserting a sound into a word. For example, “de-addy”
- Prolongations of words. For example “mmmmommy”
- Uncontrollable pitch changes

It's also worth noting that most children who stutter show signs of tension or great effort as they stutter through trying to form correct word sounds. Other, non-stuttering children, may make a stuttering-like mistake, but will pass over it easily.

Is there help?

Yes, stuttering is a common speech problem that, unfortunately, goes untreated far too often. The successful treatment of stuttering will often boost children's self-esteem and improve their classroom performance. If you suspect that your child has a stuttering problem, you may want to first consult with your child's teacher or guidance counselor to make sure that this is not just a normal phase of development.

To get treatment for your child, you should contact a licensed Speech Pathologist. If you have insurance, it is a good idea to consult with your insurance provider first to make sure that the treatment is covered, and that you are following proper procedures. If you need assistance with getting treatment, your child's school, family doctor, or the public health unit can help.

Here are some other things that you may want to keep in mind when dealing with a child who stutters:

Slow things down:

- Remind your child to stop, slow down, think about what they want to say, and breathe slowly.
- Slow down your speech as you talk to your child.
- Slow your child down, not just his or her speech. Get your child to calm down before he/she tries to speak.
- Give him/her plenty of time to finish what he/she wants to say.

Limit corrections:

- Don't correct every stutter. As long as you understand what your child is saying, there is no need to point out the stuttering.
- Try to cut down the number of questions you ask.

Help your child feel accepted:

- Make sure that all family members learn to take turns talking and listening (limit interrupting and talking over one another).
- Show your child that you understand him/her by body language, such as eye contact, head nodding, and reflecting back.
- Yelling and severe criticism can make children feel bad about themselves, so try to avoid both.
- If possible, spend a few minutes alone with your child each day, and do something fun together (something that your child enjoys).
- Educate others who spend time with your child (e.g., teachers, coaches, or babysitters) about stuttering.

To find more information about help in your area, call the Stuttering Foundation of America at 1-800-992-9392 or <http://www.stutteringhelp.org/>