

Speech Fluency

Speech fluency refers to how fluent or smooth your child's speech is when talking. Everyone has times when their speech is not completely fluent. This is referred to as disfluent speech or speech disfluencies. Some examples of common speech disfluencies in everyday talking include: pausing, saying 'uh' or 'um' in the middle of talking, or re-starting a sentence to revise what was said.

It is common for children to go through a stage of disfluent speech around three to four years of age. Some common speech disfluencies at this age include:

- Phrase repetitions "where's my.... where's my...where's my ball?"
- Word repetitions "my...my...my...my ball"
- Part-word repetitions "base...base... baseball"
- Sound repetitions "b...b...ball"

While some parents might refer to this as 'stuttering', it is not a true stutter. It is a part of normal development and can be referred to as a 'developmental disfluency'. It is similar to a child tripping and falling when learning to walk, but instead the child is 'tripping' on their speech when learning to talk.

There are different factors that can contribute to disfluencies at this age:

- Learning to coordinate all of the speech movements needed to express words / sentences at a time when language skills are rapidly increasing.
- Feelings of being tired, excited, or ill.
- Feelings of frustration or lack of self-confidence.
- Feeling time-pressured to talk. Some children in busy households with talkative older siblings might feel the need to talk quickly or else miss out on their chance to talk.
- Feeling 'put on the spot' by others to talk, such as being told "tell Mrs. Smith what you did today".
- Being interrupted when talking.
- New situations or large groups of people.

Referral to a speech-language pathologist is recommended for further evaluation when you see the following less common disfluency patterns:

- Sound blocks (seems 'stuck' before getting the sound out) "...ball"
- Sound prolongations "baaaaall"
- Facial characteristics and other visible difficulties accompanying the speech disfluencies, including: rapid eye blinking, facial grimacing, wide mouth openings, irregular breathing, and / or any other extra face or body movements during speech.

You are encouraged to contact a speech-language pathologist any time that you have questions or concerns about your child's speech.

What you can do to help... Most children will outgrow speech disfluencies on their own. There are some things that you can do to help reduce any chance that your child's typical developmental disfluencies will develop into a true stutter. These include:

- Try to provide a calm, unhurried environment for your child. If possible, try to find a few minutes in the day for some special one-on-one time, so that your child has a chance to talk at his own pace without feeling pressured.
- Make sure that your children all get a chance to talk and that they don't interrupt each other. When necessary, remind them whose turn it is to talk.
- Pay attention to your child when he is talking to you. Let him know that you're listening to him and interested in what he is saying. Don't rush him.
- Don't demand speech from her if she is crying, injured, or upset. These situations are very likely to disrupt her fluency.
- Don't put him 'on the spot' to talk to friends and relatives. Instead, let him talk when he is ready. If you are concerned about his developing good manners, you can use the manners so that he has a model for when he is ready to talk.
- Keep your own speech at a slow, but natural, pace when talking to her.
- Allow him to finish what he is saying. Don't interrupt him or complete his sentences for him.
- Don't make suggestions to her about talking in a better way. Even though suggestions like "slow down" or "take a breath and start over" might seem helpful, they actually send the message that there is something wrong with the way she is talking. These types of suggestions might result in your child feeling less confident or more upset about talking. If you think she needs a moment to pause and start over, you can tell her "I really want to hear what you're saying. Just give me a minute so that I can put this down and then really listen to you". Make the pause about you wanting to give her your full attention, rather than about the way she is talking.
- If you notice your child is having a very disfluent day, you can change the language you use to expect less talking from him. For example, asking him "what did you do at preschool today?" requires him to first figure out the important things to talk about and then put words together into sentences to answer your question. The more he has to talk, the more likely it is that he will be disfluent. Instead, you can ask a choice question such as "did you play inside or outside today?" or a yes/no question such as "did you play outside today?". These questions require shorter answers which are more likely to be fluent.