

You Can Overcome Stuttering

Parents are advised to start therapy early to manage this problem in their children

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(translation by Amy Strekas, American Institute of Stuttering)

What do Vice President Joe Biden, actress Marilyn Monroe, singer Marc Anthony, writer Jorge Luis Borges, and golfer Tiger Woods have in common?

All of them are or were, at sometime in their life, stutterers.

Stuttering, which will be celebrated this Saturday, October 22 [International Stuttering Awareness Day], is a speech disorder that affects over 68 million people worldwide, including 3 million in the U.S., representing approximately 1% of the population.

While this is a problem that can be corrected almost entirely with speech-language therapy, there are a lot of myths and fears about it.

"Usually parents notice the first signs of their child stuttering between the ages of 2 and 4 years, when they begin to learn many words and try to use them in sentences," said Jane H. Fraser, president of the Stuttering Foundation of America.

"In these situations we recommend that parents speak more slowly and use simple vocabulary and simple sentences, until they improve the speaking skills of their children," suggests this expert, whose foundation provides a list of 7 tips (see below).

Stuttering, explains Fraser, is a disorder that occurs because of the interruption of the normal flow of speech. It is characterized by the repetition or prolongation of words when speaking or complete blockages. However, what most people hear are the repetitions.

"Children who stutter have different speech/language production processes, and the brain is organized differently than in people who do not stutter. It does not mean that these children will never speak fluidly, but they will have more difficulties," says Fraser.

According to this expert, what can cause stuttering is the fact that the child is very smart and knows a lot vocabulary. "They are very advanced in their language, but their motor skills are slower or not developed enough to deliver all that vocabulary," says Fraser rejecting the myth that stutterers are not smart.

This expert encourages parents to read all they can find on this subject, because the more you know, the less fear you have. "It's scary when a child is talking and suddenly begins to stutter."

"Parents should not be afraid to talk about this, on the contrary, they should talk openly with their child, so that the child begins to understand that it is not something to be ashamed of," suggests Fraser.

Stuttering is a genetic condition. Some children are born with a predisposition to stutter, but that does not mean that they must live with it forever.

"Medical research has shown that stuttering is a physical disorder that runs in families. It is neurological and has to do with how the nervous system is organized. There are children who are more predisposed to be adults who stutter. It is something that tends to be hereditary," says Heather L. Grossman, clinical director of the American Institute for Stuttering.

It is estimated that approximately 60% of people who stutter have a family member who does, too. 95% of cases begin between the ages of 2 and 4 years, and it has been shown that the problem affects males four times more often than females.

Early treatment is key

Experts agree that success in improving a child's stuttering depends on if you start early speech therapy or not.

"Early intervention with children who begin to show symptoms of stuttering increases the likelihood that they will not be a stutterer in adulthood," said Heather L. Grossman.

"We know that 80 percent of children who stutter before the age of 5 do not continue stuttering into adulthood, but the other 20 percent continue doing this as adults (1 in 5)," says Grossman.

For this reason, stuttering specialists insist that parents should not ignore the problem and should seek expert help as soon as possible.

Most of those who treat stuttering in children are not pediatricians, but speech therapists specially trained in this field.

For parents who have no health insurance or who cannot afford a private therapist, Jane Fraser indicates that all children at least three years of age are entitled to get free speech therapy in school. "There is a special education law that says if you think your child stutters, the school is supposed to provide an assessment of your child's

language."

Enrique Gonzalez, a speech therapist who works for the New York Department of Education, in a public school in Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan, advises parents that if you think your child stutters, the first thing you have to do is talk to a therapist to evaluate the child.

Besides—Gonzalez advises—it is necessary to determine whether this condition affects the child's social life. "If the child realizes that he speaks differently and that's why they are making fun of him, that may affect him academically and socially. He might not want to go out or make friends because he is ashamed, or he may be afraid to speak in class because he doesn't want to make a fool of himself even though he knows the answer. "

Many children who stutter develop frustration, insecurity and depression, so this therapist believes that if stuttering is affecting the child academically and socially, then place him/her in treatment as soon as possible. "Therapy is mostly counseling and teaching some techniques to breathe properly or to speak slowly," says Gonzalez.

This therapist, whose patients are 100 percent Hispanic, recommends that the entire family be involved in the therapeutic process. "It is an essential part to involve parents, the family, because there are often siblings who are making fun of the stutterer. You have to educate the whole family. "

Remember, the percentage of people who learn to manage their stuttering is very high. You just need just to inform yourself, educate yourself and seek help.

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Being bilingual is not a risk

A study in the United Kingdom in 2008, published in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, suggests that children who are bilingual are no more likely to be stutterers than those who speak only one language. Although the study does not explain the reasons for reaching this conclusion, the research makes clear that stuttering does not affect the academic performance of bilingual children.

The experts consulted for this story agree that being bilingual is not a risk for stuttering, but it may make it harder to treat children who are already stutterers.

"If the child is stuttering, learning two languages at the same time can make things

worse. If the parents speak only Spanish at home, because they cannot speak English, and the child speaks English in school, there is no reason to change that, because they are doing this separately. The problem is when parents mix the two languages and confuse them and that does not help anything, "says Jane Fraser.

Meanwhile, Heather Grossman says: "Living in a bilingual family may be somewhat more demanding, because there are more languages, more to learn. Bilingual parents must meet with a speech therapist to use the same techniques in Spanish that we use in English, and they should speak more slowly and try not to use complicated vocabulary. "

7 TIPS FOR PARENTS:

1. Talk with your child in a slow and deliberate manner. When the child is speaking to you, let him finish what he is saying and wait a few seconds before you start talking. Speaking more slowly and relaxed will help your child more than any criticism or advice such as "slow down" or "try again more slowly."
2. Reduce the number of questions you ask your child. Instead of asking questions, use comments about what your child is saying to let him know that you are listening. Children speak more freely if they express their own ideas than if they answer questions from adults.
3. Use facial expressions and nonverbal communication to tell your child that you are listening to the content of his message and not how he is saying it.
4. Have a few minutes of time each day when you can give your full attention to the child. This quiet and calm time is a confidence builder for young children, allowing them to know that you enjoy their company.
5. Help all family members to learn about taking turns and listening. Children, especially those who stutter, find it easier to speak when there are few interruptions and they have the attention of the listener.
6. Notice how you interact with the child. Try increasing the time you spend listening to your child while allowing him plenty of time to talk. Try to decrease criticisms, rapid speech patterns, interruptions and questions.
7. Above all, explain that you accept your child as he is. The most valuable thing will be to support your child whether he stutters or not.

MYTHS AND REALITY

Myth 1: Stutterers are not smart.

Fact: There is no relationship that links intelligence and stuttering.

Myth 2: Nervousness causes stuttering.

Reality: No. Nor should we assume that people who stutter are likely to experience nervousness, anxiety or shame. They have the same personality characteristics of people who do not stutter.

Myth 3: It helps to say "take a deep breath before speaking" or "think of what you are going to say before you speak."

Fact: The truth is that this advice makes the person more aware of their problem and may cause the person to stutter more. The best thing to do is to listen patiently and model slow and clear speech.

Myth 4: Stress causes stuttering.

Fact: There are several complex factors involved. Stress is not the cause of stuttering but certainly can aggravate stuttering.

SOURCE: THE STUTTERING FOUNDATION