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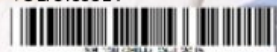
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VOL. 8 ISSUE 7



FROM PRE-BIRTH TO 12




# when words don't flow easy

On the occasion of International Stuttering Awareness Day on October 22, we get experts to help you with ways to handle your sweetheart's not-so-clear speech. by **SUJA NATARAJAN**



SHUTTERSTOCK.



A photograph of a woman with dark hair lying on her back, smiling up at a young girl with long brown hair who is leaning over her. The girl is also smiling and has her mouth open as if speaking or laughing. They are both wearing white clothing. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**WHEN** Mumbai-based jewellery designer Sonal Dhadda's two-and-a-half-year-old son Pratham repeated few words like 'ma-ma-mamma', she initially found it cute. But it did start to bother her when he struggled to say even a few other words correctly. She tried to brush away her worries as Pratham was too young and was only learning to talk. However, the pattern grew with time.

Millions of people across the world stutter and the majority includes young kids. But it will still break your heart when you hear your child struggle to say simple words. Bengaluru-based Varsha Jevoor, speech language pathologist at Winds O' Change says, "Occasional stumbling of words do occur in toddlers when they are excited, upset or tired. Nevertheless, speech dysfluencies affect more than 10 per cent of children aged 2 to 5 years."



## DECODING THE STUTTER

Stuttering is not always an effect of an emotional problem. There may be other factors that could lead to stuttering. “Developmental, neurogenic and psychogenic are the three types of stuttering. Developmental stuttering occurs anytime between one-and-a-half and three years because this is the time when there is rapid speech development in a child. Neurogenic stuttering occurs due to an injury (head injury or a stroke, for instance) or a disease in the nervous system, while emotional trauma causes psychogenic stuttering,” explains Jevoor.

## THE RED FLAGS

Your preschooler’s speech may at times be peppered with repetitive sounds of a word because his mind is busy learning to voice his thoughts with sounds or words. However, watch out for a few indications. “The child repeats a part of a word like ‘pi-pi-pi-picnic’ instead of the whole word or prolongs a word or part of a word, like ‘baaaaaaaaaa-ball’ instead of ‘ba-ba-ball’. He could display tension in his voice or on his face or neck, avoid eye contact or appear frustrated with the inability to say a word. Symptoms also include blinking of eyes, pounding of fists, stomping of legs or turning away while attempting to say the word. He may substitute words or stop talking in the middle of a sentence because he might stutter,” says Nehal Kothari, Speech Language Pathologist, at Mumbai-based Let’s Talk Speech Therapy.

## WHEN TO SEEK HELP

While most doctors suggest a wait-and-watch approach, don’t hesitate to visit your child’s doctor if you’re concerned. “Even if you have a per cent of doubt, you

should immediately consult the doctor. The earlier you do so, the faster you can help your child,” says Dhadda, whose son has now overcome the disorder. Kothari recommends that parents consult a speech therapist when the child stutters for more than 6 to 12 months. Also, if she has a strong family history of stuttering, shows signs of stuttering or, if her speech has sound errors, it’s time to spring into action.

## MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Here are 10 expert tips to help you cope with your child’s stuttering patterns.

### 1 learn more

The more aware you are, the better able you will be to help your child. Gather facts that will help you make the right decisions for your child. “One of the most important things I did was to learn the entire therapy from the therapist to use it at home and make it work. I did a lot of research, read a lot and spoke with many experts,” says Dhadda.

### 2 acknowledge

Don’t brush the matter under the carpet. Like any other challenge that your child may face during her development phases, acknowledge the issue and talk about it openly with her. “It is, of course, sad to see my child struggle to speak, but I don’t show my non-verbal cues whenever she’s having a hard time talking. Instead, I say, ‘Sometimes talking can be hard with difficult words and I too get stuck at times. I want to hear what you just said. Can you repeat that?’” says Bengaluru-based Snigdha Kotian, mom to Nidhi, 4.

### 3 don’t interrupt

Varaprasad, dad to four-year-old Tanish Ramkumar, concurs that

## ➔ 5 EASY SPEECH ACTIVITIES

**Conversation Starters:** In a fun environment, get the child to describe a festival, favourite toy, game, family or even a pet.

**Picture Cards:** Have the child talk about the picture in the card using easy and simple words.

**Tele Chat:** Talk on the phone with the child where he uses slow speech to answer simple questions and describe situations on the phone.

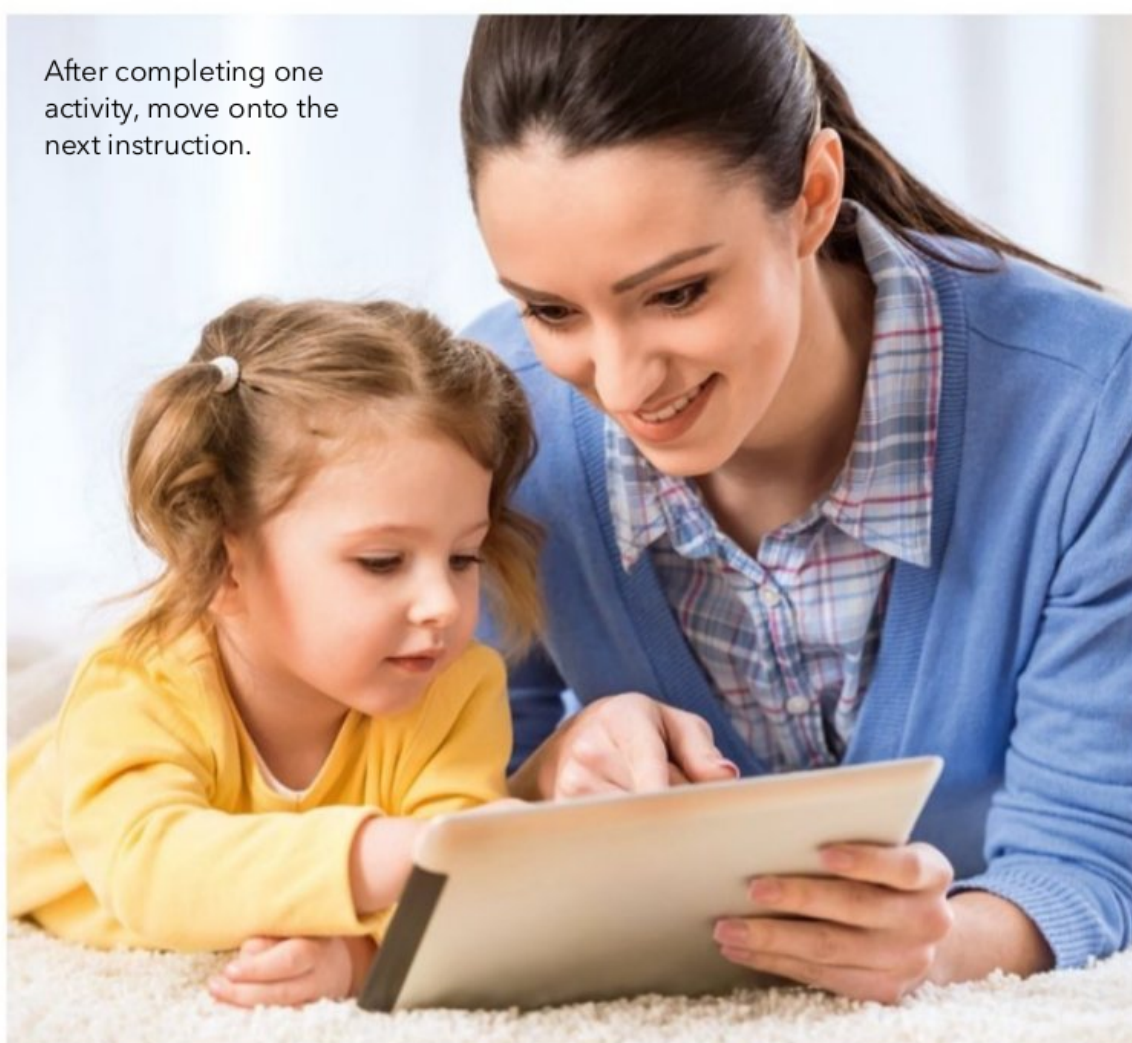
**Puppet Talk:** Let the child make finger puppets and start a conversation between the characters.

**Tell-a-joke:** Share a joke at a slow pace with frequent pauses. Now have your child tell a joke in a similar manner, which will reinforce a slow pace of speech and pauses amidst a lot of giggles.

interruptions can be a deterrent in developing fluency. It is important for your child that you remain patient and avoid interrupting or completing his words or sentences. “We observe every activity he does through the day and encourage him to talk with simple activities. We help him relax whenever he stutters. Instead of asking a lot of



After completing one activity, move onto the next instruction.



questions, we let him express his ideas freely and whichever way he wants to,” says the Bengaluru-based executive.

## 4 minimize demands

Stress and pressure can disrupt language fluency. A child experiences anxiety when he’s not able to keep up with the demand to talk quickly. Listen tolerantly and speak to him at a relaxed pace to reduce such pressure. Don’t expose your child to situations that are high-pressured, like asking him to narrate a story or rhyme in front of visitors. However, encourage him to talk, if he wants to.

## 5 maintain a positive environment

Don’t get irritated or upset about your child’s flow of words. Try and keep the environment relaxed and structured. “Comfort and reassure your child when he feels frustrated and don’t let him know that his condition is worrisome to you,” suggests Kothari.

## 6 find and address the trigger

Children who stutter experience a range of emotions. Identify the factors that trigger the pattern and use those that support fluency. “My son’s hyperactive nature was the primary reason for his stuttering. So I tried to keep his energy levels under control and he would actually be fine once he was calm. We also practised activities like breathing as well as other techniques too,” adds Dhadda.

## 7 keep the instructions simple

Instead of combining several instructions, split them up into short and simple sentences to build your child’s confidence. “Complex sentences overwhelmed Nidhi. So instead of saying, ‘We will read now, do craft later and then solve puzzles,’ I would just ask, ‘Can we read a book now?’ After the activity was over, I would move on to the next instruction,” says Kotian.

## 8 opt for therapies

Professional methods and speech therapies can bring about language clarity. “We improve speech fluency with a variety of strategies like modified air technique or the cognitive behaviour therapy where we identify the stress-inducing factors to help the child. Electronic devices or tools like a metronome are also seen to improve the child’s rhythm and fluency,” explains Jevoor. Early diagnosis as well as a proper attitude are necessary for better treatment. The severity of the stuttering and the type of therapy determine the length of any treatment.

## 9 be persistent

Although the measures to help a dysfluent child are easy, it needs a lot of effort and persistence. As Kothari says, stuttering may seem like a difficult problem to cope with, but you can successfully manage with early detection, right help at the right time, and determination to continue with your efforts.

## 10 involve the whole family

Nothing can replace a family’s love, encouragement, understanding, and patience when dealing with children. Positive feedback and reinforcement encourage a child to speak more at home and in school. “I involved my whole family to interact with Pratham positively and avoided those who made fun of him, as I didn’t want his self-esteem to be affected. Although it needed a lot of unwavering patience and time, he recovered after a year of treatment,” says Dhadda. Also, it’s wise to meet the teachers, introduce them to the therapists and keep them all involved in the plan of action. ●