

Stuttering

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Three-year-old Judy sometimes repeats her syllables *li-li-like* this. And she peppers her sentences with “uh” and “um” often enough that her mother worries she’ll grow up to stutter, be the object of snickers, or the brunt of cruel jokes.

Judy’s pediatrician is not alarmed, but that does not calm her mother.

What her mother should understand is that many young children have trouble selecting words, pronouncing some words, and completing thoughts when they are learning to speak. They may use fillers such as “um,” “er,” and “uh” and repeat syllables and words. These are Judy’s symptoms, and they are common, normal, and usually temporary.

Nobody knows for sure why. Some children have a hard time forming certain sounds and coordinating and timing sequences of sounds into flowing speech. Boys are three to four times more likely to stutter than girls. And emotional stress may worsen a stuttering problem. It is not unusual for a child to stutter when talking to an adult, but not when speaking to a pet.

But several characteristics, if noticed in a child’s early speech, should be brought to the attention of a specialist. Talk to a specialist if your child repeats syllables or words three or four times in a row, or frequently repeats weak vowel sounds, such as “ah” in the word “around.” A child who says “go-go-goat” is likely to have less of a problem than a child who says, “guh-guh-goat.”

Stammering over initial sounds, such as “Mmmmmmmommy,” is another sign of possible concern. Tension in the small muscles around the mouth and jaw when repetitions in speech occur may indicate a serious problem. Another sign is if children become upset when speaking, are afraid to speak, or avoid speaking at all.

You can do several things to help. If you are concerned, see a specialist. Never get angry at a child who has trouble speaking. And don’t say, “talk slower,” “take a deep breath” or “relax.” It doesn’t help.

Don’t finish a stuttering child’s sentences. Not only is that an annoying habit, but it only reminds children that they are doing a poor job speaking.

Listen to your stuttering child with all ears, no matter how difficult it might be. Have conversations – two-way conversations, not lectures – several times a day. Doing so tells your child you are interested, builds your child’s confidence, and helps your child relax.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.