



Stuttering- Can It Be Cured?

Do you know what master statesman Sir Winston Churchill, actors James Earl Jones and Bruce Willis, singer Carly Simon, and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber have in common? They are all famous people who stutter!

Stuttering or stammering, as it is sometimes called, is dysfluent speech (ie. an interruption in the smooth flow of speech). People who stutter often uncontrollably repeat part or whole words (“I I I want m m my b b books”) and stretch some of their words (“I waaaaant”). They could also block on their words, that is, they are not able to produce sound.

Causes Of Stuttering

Though there is no known cause of stuttering, there is some indication that a genetic predisposition for stuttering runs in families. People who stutter, usually also have parents, grandparents or relatives who stutter.

Traumatic events, nervousness and stress do not cause stuttering - they merely exacerbate the stuttering problem. Parents who fear that ‘bad’ parenting could cause stuttering can also be assured that this is not so. In fact, the causes of stuttering are not precisely known as it is a complicated condition.

In Singapore, at least 1% of the population stutter, with more males than females suffering from this problem.

Signs Of Stuttering

The first signs of stuttering usually occur between two to five years of age. It is easy to spot as children will start repeating, dragging, or blocking on their words unintentionally. As this is the age where children are still developing their speech, parents need to know how to differentiate the normal stage of speech development and an actual speech disorder.

Parents may wish to seek the advice of a speech therapist if the child exhibits the following signs:

- Excessive repetitions of whole words and phrases.
- Increasing frequency of sound and syllable repetitions.
- Increased facial tension or tightness in the speech muscles.
- The child appears to be struggling with speech and avoids situations where he/she will have to talk.

Treatment

Parents should not attempt to treat the disorder themselves. They should bring their children to see a speech therapist. The best age to seek help would be when the dysfluency rears its head, usually between the age of two to five years. If treated early, pre-school children have good recovery rate of 80% - 100%. The longer the treatment is delayed, the harder it is to treat the stutter and the slimmer the chances of recovery.

The Behaviour Modification Approach has been proven to be successful in arresting the dysfluent speech behaviour in young children. Past the early years when speech patterns have set, speech modification methods and auditory feedback devices can only help to mask (hide) the stutter, but not eradicate it. In other words, relatively stutter-free speech is possible for people who train themselves with these techniques and devices.

In Singapore, stuttering often goes undiagnosed. The temptation to leave it alone is great, especially in the little ones where parents hope that the children will grow out of their dysfluent speech. Very often, parents seek help only after the kids are in that school and face problems with oral exams. It should be noted that school-age children is a difficult age group to work with as most of them have grown defensive about their speech. It is best to bring the children for therapy when they are very young. Parents who enter the therapy process must be willing to dedicate time to daily speech practice with a therapy programme that lasts for three years.

There is help for this speech disorder in NUH. Our speech therapists are trained to work with children and adults who stutter. Patients can get an appointment here with a doctor's referral by calling NUH's Rehabilitation Centre appointment line at 6772 5168.