

# Speech Impairment



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## What are speech impairments?

There are various types of speech impairment that can occur singly or in combination. The causes can also vary – in some cases it is a ‘primary disorder’, this means that there is no obvious ‘other cause’ for the impairment while a ‘secondary disorder’ means that the problem with speech is caused by something else such as an accident or condition or disease.

The most common problems occur with basic communication in that this is a two way process and depends both on clear expression on the one hand and full comprehension on the other. Where a speech impairment blocks either of these factors a breakdown in communication can occur.

This can result either in the basic gist of a conversation being understood while details remain unclear, or in extreme cases the opposite meaning to that intended being drawn, due to a misunderstanding of a few vital words.

A common misconception is that a speech impairment or a difficulty in communicating suggests a lack of intelligence. Often those with communication difficulties have alternative methods of expressing their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Explore with the young person, and their parent/guardian or carer different methods used to get the message across to aid with communication.

Common forms of speech impairments include:

- *Articulation* - arising from difficulties in forming sounds. This can result in great frustration to all concerned.

- *Fluency* - often called stammering or stuttering. This can take a number of forms – repeating sounds or words or stretching them out or speaking in a rather jerky way.
- When the problem is severe normal communication may be totally disrupted. This may be most noticeable in front of strangers, or when the person is conscious of the attention of others. It may lead to the individual trying to avoid some speaking situations altogether. Teasing by peers is common.

## Living with a speech impairment

Some individuals may work on programmes tailored individually by Speech Therapists, either at home, hospital or school, or a combination of these. In severe cases alternative methods of communication may be used involving sign language or electronic aids. One of the most common sign languages used is Makaton. Others include Paget-Gorman and Bliss, which uses a picture board.

## Practical Tips

Stress and attention can exacerbate a speech impairment and the best results can be gained by providing as relaxed an atmosphere so that those concerned can feel confident about speaking. Obviously any form of teasing compounds the effect of their condition.

Patience is the key word!

## Stammering

If too many speech demands are put upon the individual, a stammer can become more pronounced. Stammering can develop with some

individuals who are very sensitive to failure or have low self-esteem.

The experience or loss of control while speaking can be embarrassing for most people, but when it happens persistently it can become humiliating for some making them feel isolated and lonely.

Someone who stammers may find it difficult to approach others either to ask questions or just for a chat. It may be difficult for them to initiate conversations with their peers and any embarrassment may limit their verbal contact with others. This may result in them seeming shy, insecure, alternatively surly or uncommunicative. Patience, understanding and getting to know the individual are the best ways to make the individual more at ease here. Providing opportunities to talk in small non-threatening groups can relieve many of the stresses, which make the stutter worse.

Failure with speech can overshadow other achievements and lead to lower esteem. Ensure that recognition is given for success or competence in other areas, which both encourages and redirects attention positively away from the speech impairment and onto the person.

It may seem ironic, but many individuals with speech impairments, especially stammering, can excel in drama or puppetry. Once the attention is drawn away from them as an individual speaking and onto the character they are porting, some individuals find a release, which allows for improved fluency.

### **Some ways to improve communication**

- Find out what alternative form of communication he/she may use e.g. British Sign Language or Makaton. Local Colleges often run training courses.
- Look at the individual with your face at the same physical level.
- Speak using language that can be easily understood and repeated back, if necessary.
- Reduce the number of questions asked, allowing time for individual, short answers.

- Give time for explanations or responses.
- Be aware of the speed of your own speech - if it is too rapid, you may need to slow down a bit yourself!
- Be encouraging, stammering can undermine confidence so that this becomes more important than other strengths – make sure positive focus is given to these.
- Be sensitive to the size of teams and groupings those with speech impairment often find large groups of people daunting.

### **Further Information**

Discuss with the individual and/or their parents the extent to which help is needed and learn any practical tips they have to offer. They may be able to arrange for speech or language therapist working with the Community Health Team, if it is felt to be helpful.

### **Support Organisations**

Afasic  
2nd Floor  
50-52 Great Sutton Street  
London  
EC1V 0DJ  
Helpline - 0845 3 55 55 77 (local call rate)  
Fax 020 7251 2834  
Email: [info@afasic.org.uk](mailto:info@afasic.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.afasic.org.uk/>

### **I CAN**

4 Dyer's Buildings  
Holborn  
London  
EC1N 2QP  
Telephone: 0870 010 4066  
Email: [info@ican.org.uk](mailto:info@ican.org.uk)  
Web site: <http://www.ican.org.uk>

### **Talking Point**

A web site for parents, carers and professionals about speech and language development in children and the difficulties that children can

experience with speech, language and communication.

Email: [info@talkingpoint.org.uk](mailto:info@talkingpoint.org.uk)

Web site: <http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/>

**The British Stammering Association**

15 Old Ford Road

London

E2 9PJ

Telephone: 020 8983 1003

Helpline: 0845 603 2001 (Open Monday – Thursday)

Fax: 020 8983 3591

Email: [info@stammering.org](mailto:info@stammering.org)

Web site: <http://www.stammering.org>

**Makaton Vocabulary Development Project**

31 Firwood Drive

Camberley

Surrey

GU15 3QD

Telephone: 01276 61390

Fax: 01276 681368

Email: [mvdp@makaton.org](mailto:mvdp@makaton.org)

Web site: <http://www.makaton.org/>

Copies of the Beaver, Cub and Scout Promises in Makaton are available from the Special Needs Office, via The Scout Information Centre (0845 300 1818)