

Talking Fluency

What is talking fluency?

Why is talking fluency important?

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What is talking fluency?

Fluency refers to the smoothness or flow with which sounds, syllables, words and phrases are said when talking. When a child is not speaking fluently terms like stuttering, stammering or cluttering are often used. A child's speech may also be dysfluent when they are trying to 'think of what to say' and are planning the words and sequence of words that they are going to use.

Why is talking fluency important?

Speaking fluently is important when relaying information and socialising. The more dysfluent speech is the more difficult is it for the speaker and the listener to engage in the conversation effectively and easily. It is important for a child to have fluent speech so that they are able to get their needs and wants met and to be able to effectively express their thoughts and ideas. It can be frustrating for the child who is not fluent when they cannot get their messages across.

At school age, having fluent speech is important when reading aloud and answering questions in front of the class and making friendships. Children between the ages of 3 years and 5 years may go through a period of "normal" dysfluency. This is usually characterised by the repetition of whole words and the beginning sounds in words (e.g. "I I I want a biscuit"). This is thought to be due to a child having a "language burst" where they are acquiring new language quickly and they need more time to formulate and produce utterances. When it is a normal dysfluency, the child tends not to realise they are being dysfluent and the dysfluencies are not dominating the speech (i.e. there are approximately 5 or less dysfluencies occurring per 100 words).

Building blocks necessary to develop talking fluency include:

- **Hearing**
- **Attention and concentration:** Sustained effort, doing activities without distraction and being able to hold that effort long enough to get the task done.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Play skills:** Voluntary engagement in self motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment where the activities may be, but are not necessarily, goal oriented.
- **Articulation:** Clarity of speech sounds and spoken language.

You can tell there are problems with talking fluency if the child:

- Is showing frustration because they can't get their words out or talking takes a lot of effort.
- Seems to get stuck on words a lot of the time.
- Repeats sounds, syllables or phrases regularly in their speech.
- Has lots of stops and starts (e.g. there is a lack of "flow") and their speech is difficult to follow and understand.
- Avoids certain words and/or phrases because they might have difficulty saying them or they get stuck on those words.
- Avoids talking because they are having difficulty communicating fluently with others.
- Shows behaviours like foot tapping, blinking or slapping their leg when trying to get a word out.
- Says 'um', 'er' or 'ah' a lot whilst thinking about what they want to say.
- Regularly rephrases sentences whilst talking.

When you see talking difficulties with fluency, you might also see difficulties with:

- **Self confidence:** A person's belief in their ability to perform a task.
- **Social skills:** Determined by the ability to engage in reciprocal interaction with others (either verbally or non-verbally), to compromise with others, and be able to recognize and follow social norms.
- **Frustration** (e.g. the child cannot "get out" what they want to say).
- **Completing oral based academic tasks** at school (e.g. the child refrains from speaking in front of the class).
- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task/activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.
- **Articulation:** Clarity of speech sounds and spoken language.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.

What can be done to improve talking fluency?

- **Speech pathology assessment:** It is very important to get early intervention for to help a child who has a stutter.
- **Work collaboratively** and liaise with kindergarten/school staff around the nature of the fluency difficulty. Set up joint communication goals and develop strategies to help support the child's fluency within the kindergarten/classroom setting.
- **Do not put the child on show:** Try and avoid situations where the child is put on the spot to answer questions especially in the presence of others or those with whom they are not familiar as this can lead to performance anxiety and increase the stutter.
- **Model a slower speech rate:** Speak using a slower rate and pause regularly when you are talking with the child. The child will follow the rate of speech that you are modelling, which will assist their fluency.
- **Reduce background noise** at home when engaging with the child (e.g. turn off the radio or television when talking to the child).
- **Don't interrupt:** Even if the child is speaking dysfluently (stuttering), try not to interrupt what they are saying by saying "slow down" or "start again".
- **Avoid telling the child to slow down,** take a breath and think about what they are saying before they say it as this can lead to added anxiety.

Activities that can help improve talking fluency include:

- **Face-to-face:** Listen to the child when they are speaking, make sure you are face to face with them and let them know that they have lots of time to get their message across and that you are listening.
- **Reduce questions:** Try not to ask too many questions as this often puts a child on the spot and they can feel under pressure to answer.
- **Taking turns:** Encourage all members of the house to take turns when talking together as children are more likely to be fluent if they are not worried about being interrupted.
- **Talking time:** Set aside a "special time" each day where it is just you and the child interacting together. Complete activities, such as playing with a toy, reading a book and/or talking about what they have done during the day.
- **Listen** to the child talking, ensuring that you are listening to the content of what they are saying and not how they are saying it. Be aware of not reacting negatively (e.g. through facial expression, gesture, getting tense) to any dysfluent speech you may hear.

Why should you seek therapy if you notice difficulties with talking fluency?

- To improve a child's ability to speak without repeating words and sounds.
- To improve a child's ability to engage with peers and adults in interactions.
- To help reduce frustration in a child who struggles verbalising their message in the home and/or school environment.
- To help increase confidence and self esteem.

Left untreated, difficulties with talking fluency can lead to:

- Difficulties forming friendships and engaging in positive social interactions with others.
- Difficulties completing higher level education.
- Difficulties engaging with unfamiliar individuals in everyday situations (e.g. asking for assistance in a shop, placing an order at a restaurant, talking on the phone).
- Difficulties communicating in a job interview or in the workplace with colleagues.

What type of therapy is recommended for talking fluency difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with fluency, it is recommended they consult a Speech Pathologist.

If you are concerned about talking fluency difficulties, the next step is:

- Call Kid Sense for an obligation-free discussion with a paediatric professional on ph 1300 66 00 67.
- Take the free on-line Self Assessment to obtain a visual representation of how your child is developing (doing this in conjunction with your teacher can be really helpful too).
- Visit the Child Development *Ages and Stages* Charts and Checklists to see what skills are expected at your child's age.
- Go to Booking an Appointment for more information.
- Review the fact sheets below for more relevant information.

Other relevant resources:

- Stuttering (fact sheet)
- Articulation (pronunciation and talking) (fact sheet)
- Expressive language (using words and language) (fact sheet)
- Receptive language (understanding words and language) (fact sheet)
- Tourette's Syndrome (fact sheet)