

STUTTERING

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Stuttering, or as it is called “disfluency”, (or defect of rhythm as it is known in professional circles), affects over 3 million people. Many famous people have stuttering problems, including John Stossel of ABC News, Mark Tillis of Country Music fame, Marilyn Monroe, and a famous figure in history, Winston Churchill, who was an eloquent speaker of his time. This proves that stutterers can be intelligent, well-adjusted, and great achievers. Stammering is another term used for stuttering, but in the United States stuttering is the preferred terminology. Males are affected 4 to 1 compared to females and there are no clear-cut answers as to why that occurs. Heredity is not known to play a factor in stuttering. Stuttering does not occur all the time. All stutterers have stutter-free periods during speech. Some 20% of all children go through a stage of development in which they encounter disfluency, sometimes severe enough to concern their parents.

Despite years of research, there is no answer to the cause of stuttering. We have learned much about the factors that contribute to its development and how to approach treatment. The definition of stuttering is involuntary, audible, or silent repetitions or prolongations of short speech elements, such as sounds and syllables. Basically, what happens in the brain is that there is an inability of the neurologic mechanism to support complex language a child is trying to master. An example of this is expanding language skills.

Every child stutters or stammers to a certain degree. But, when you see a trend, which is typically seen about 42 to 48 months of age, this may be suggestive of a problem that requires treatment. The best prognosis for recovery, as with all other processes, is at the earliest point in which it is diagnosed. In this case, the child would have less anxiety, tension and peer pressure if it is picked up early and he is placed in therapy. Starting preschool or school can be stressful. New words are encountered. The rigors and demands of school put the child in a situation that can affect him emotionally. He is now out of the safety of his home where his parents and family support and understand his problem and he is now facing peer pressure, which may drive the problem even further. You can imagine that this would be a formidable problem in the teen years, as dating and social interaction begins. Treatment is available by qualified clinicians to initially evaluate the patient, looking at issues of genetics, child development and family dynamics. Treatment plans include speech therapy and sometimes the assistance of a psychologist or psychiatrist. In many cases, the recovery can be spontaneous after some treatment time. Family support is crucial and very rewarding when the parent sees their child become fluent in speech.

People who stutter are self-conscious and often let this disability determine their vocation and life choices. There is no instant cure for stuttering and therapy is not an overnight process, but a speech impediment need not be an impedance to life. Contact the Stuttering Foundation at (800) 992-9392, or its website at www.stutteringhelp.org for more information.