

## Information about Stuttering for Pre-school Teachers

### What is stuttering?

Stuttering is a physical problem not a psychological one. It involves an interruption to the complex process of speech development. Although the severity of stuttering varies from child to child, it can also vary within an individual child, worsening in situations such as being under time pressure to talk, or when tired.

### Onset

Around 10% of children start to stutter during the pre-school years, when they are starting to put words together into short utterances. The first signs of stuttering are usually the repetition of sounds or syllables. An example is "I-I-I want ...". However, a child may soon start to struggle with speech and stretch out speech sounds, sometimes with speech blocked for a few seconds. While some normal disfluency occurs during speech development, it is usually easy to tell the difference between that and the early signs of stuttering.

### Natural recovery

Many but not all children recover naturally from stuttering, and this can occur up to 3 years after onset. More girls recover than boys, leaving a 4:1 ratio of boys to girls at around 5 years of age. Unfortunately, it is not possible to predict whether an individual child will recover naturally.

### How stuttering affects pre-school children

Research has indicated the following about pre-schoolers who are stuttering. They are usually aware of their own stuttering and they

- may be teased, mocked and ignored by peers when they stutter
- may reduce their speech output and avoid speaking in some situations
- often play less with peers
- are sometimes unable to get their message across because of their stuttering.

### Interventions

It is important that a child sees a speech pathologist as soon as possible after onset. There are a number of interventions to help pre-schoolers who stutter, the best researched being the Lidcombe Program. This program was developed in Australia and is widely used internationally. It is conducted by a parent or carer in the child's everyday environment, under the guidance of a speech pathologist. It is recommended that the program be implemented as soon as practicable after the presence of stuttering is confirmed by a speech pathologist.

### What can pre-school teachers do to support a child who stutters?

- Lasting psychological problems can begin to develop if a child has a socially traumatic experience in relation to their stuttering.
- For that reason, it is essential to watch out for teasing or mocking by peers. It is important to support the child if such things occur.
- Wait patiently for a child to finish if stuttering is slowing communication with you. If you wait, the child will eventually be able to say what is needed.
- Try to include the child in group activities if the child appears reticent to do so, but don't force the issue.
- Talk with the parent if you notice a child stuttering. It is important to understand that parents can be distressed about their child's stuttering.