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Parents' Guide

SPEECH DISORDERS



FROM STAMMERING, STUTTERING TO PUBERPHONIA, PROBLEMS IN SPEECH ARE MORE COMMONPLACE THAN THOUGHT EARLIER. DO NOT IGNORE EARLY SIGNS OF THEIR MANIFESTATION.

overcoming
SPEECH DISORDERS

INDIA TODAY Aspire



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“Be patient and emphatic without being patronising to speed the treatment.”

Stuttering or stammering refers to the speech which does not flow fluently. Although the cause for stuttering is not well established, it is thought to be more of a 'learned' behaviour. A common sequel to this condition is increased anxiety in situations that require the affected person to speak. This leads to a vicious cycle setting in, where by, an increase in anxiety levels invariably leads to an increase in stuttering behaviour. Parents, family members, friends and teachers can help speed the treatment by reducing anxiety levels in the social situation by being patient and empathetic (without patronising). Positive awareness (rather than the 'comic' portrayals in the visual media) is much needed to help societal acceptance of people who stutter.

Puberphonia, which refers to a condition that affects teenaged boys, occurs when their voice fails to 'break' i.e., they continue to speak in a high pitched voice. There is no organic bases for puberphonia, rather, it is thought to result from psychological reasons. If left untreated, it can result in adverse changes in the vocal folds which could be pathological. Thus, this is a condition that demands immediate attention. The good news about puberphonia is that it can be treated successfully by speech language pathologists.



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“Bring in professional help as soon as possible. Timely intervention is crucial.”

Speech and language disorders can be caused due to hearing loss, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, neurological disorders, psychological problems or unknown causes. A child is considered to be delayed in communication development when he/she is significantly behind the peer group. This can be either due to language impairment or a speech problem. A language disorder is impairment in the ability to understand and/or use words in context. Speech disorders refer to difficulty in producing speech sounds or abnormality of voice quality. Common speech problems include stuttering, misarticulation or changes in pitch or loudness of voice. Some of the speech problems occur during the developmental phase of childhood while others can be acquired later in life, for example, voice problems in professional voice users such as singers, teachers, call centre workers or lawyers. Parents should understand that timely intervention is crucial; else one problem may lead to many others. To quote an example, initial mild stuttering can lead to psychological problems and lack of confidence resulting in poor performance later. Parents should work in close association with speech pathologists to develop effective therapy techniques.



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“Refrain from getting angry or issuing stern instructions. This worsens the problem.”

Speech could broadly be analysed by parents asking themselves four basic questions: 1 Clarity : How easy is it for an unaccustomed person to understand what the child is saying? 2 Fluency : Does s/he hesitate or get stuck with certain sounds? 3 Voice Quality : Is the voice too high pitched or is it unpleasant or inadequate in other ways? 4 Rate of Speaking : Is s/he talking too fast or too slow? Some of these speech problems mentioned could be the result of physical factors such as a tongue-tie or a sub-mucous cleft which has

gone undetected so far, or some physical issues with the larynx (voice-box). Other speech problems, specially stammering/stuttering have strong behavioural repercussions and need special handling by parents. It is always advisable to consult a local speech therapist who can help analyse the problem and devise a therapy programme. Where such facilities are not easily available, parents could themselves help their child through guidance from a speech therapist via telephone. With an increasingly efficient telephone network in India, tele-therapy services are becoming a viable way for people in even remote villages to get professional counselling. Speech is one of the body's strongest habits and overcoming speech problems requires patience. Parents should refrain from getting angry or stern with the children. This only results in making them wary and can worsen the problem. Stammering is a result of a mis-timing of electrical signals from the brain during the times the child is excited or nervous. Parents should listen to 'what' the child is saying rather than 'how' he is saying it while ensuring that their child regularly does his speech-exercises.