RCSLT

Position statement on stammering

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Stammering: An RCSLT Position Statement

Introduction

This document is for managers and commissioners of speech and language therapy services across the four nations of the UK. It outlines the nature of stammering, the benefits of speech and language therapy and the risks of a lack of service provision.

Terminology

The terms ‘stammering’, ‘stuttering’ and ‘dysfluency’ can be used inter-changeably. The term dysfluency is deficit based whereas stammering or stuttering acknowledge the lived experience without implying that variation is inferior. Within the UK, ‘stammering’ is the term most used by organisations that provide support to this group of people. Stammering will be the term used within this position paper.

What is stammering?

Stammering is a form of speech variation caused by a complex range of factors including neurophysiology.

Stammering, also known as stuttering, comprises repetitions and prolongations of sounds and syllables and moments of blocking when a sound is restricted by excessive tension in speech. People who stammer may experience negative thoughts and feelings associated with speaking and employ strategies to conceal stammering. Research has indicated that stammering is stigmatised and that people receive negative listener responses and children who stammer are more likely to be bullied at school (Crichton-Smith, 2002; Boyle, 2015; Coalson et al., 2022).

In more recent years, ableist views around stammering have been challenged through the influence of the social model of disability (Constantino et al., 2022), stammering pride (Campbell et al., 2019) and the neurodiversity movement.

Stammering is typically developmental and starts in early childhood. Stammering acquired in adolescence and adulthood often results from neurological, psychological or pharmacological changes.

Role of speech and language therapists

Speech and Language Therapists play a key role in supporting children, young people and adults who stammer. They aim:

- to support people to communicate to their potential, to talk freely, say what they want, when they want, enjoy communicating with ease, comfort and freedom.
- to create environments where stammering voices are included, respected and viewed as valuable and important, as how some people speak.
- to support the connection with others who stammer.
- to prevent or reduce the negative impact of stammering on the person/carers/environment.

For some people, stammering reduces or stops over time.

Using specialist skills, they work directly with the individual client and with others in their life. For children this involves working with parents, carers and school. Speech and language therapists support young people and adults to be able to advocate for themselves.

Benefits of providing a speech and language therapy service

There are multiple benefits of speech and language therapy for people who stammer.

- Speech and Language Therapists are qualified professionals who must be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. The quality and safety of their practice are guided by a professional code of ethics and standards of practice.
- The possibility of negative future negative impact of stammering can be reduced by early intervention (Van Der Meulen and Pangalila, 2022). It can support positive interaction between the child and parent and reduce parental anxiety (Millard et al, 2018). The negative impact of stammering in young children can be significantly reduced (Franken et al., 2015) with long term positive outcomes (Koushik et al, 2009).
- People who stammer may experience a social impact as a result of their speech differences (Iverach et al., 2016), a risk which can be reduced through good support from speech and language therapy. The opportunity to meet others who stammer in group therapy has positive benefits in terms of self-acceptance and increased communicative confidence (Everard &Howell, 2018).
- The communication skills and mental health benefits gained from speech and language therapy enhance both educational and employment outcomes.

- Speech and language therapists offer training to other professionals to increase early identification and referral. They advocate for people who stammer to ensure a supportive communication environment such as in schools.
- Speech and language therapists support people who stammer in becoming effective, confident communicators.

Risks of not providing a speech and language therapy service

Imagine being laughed at by your peers when you answer a question in class or failing your French GCSE oral because you weren't given enough time to speak. Imagine not being able to get a GP appointment because the receptionist hangs up on you every time you call when you stammer on your own name. What if recruiters assume you can't hold a management position just because you stammer. These experiences matter.

The risks of not providing an adequate speech and language therapy service are considerable in terms of the cost to the individual and to society. The impact of stammering extends far beyond speech. The absence of speech and language therapy support is likely to mean that:

- stammering may have a significant impact on the individual's quality of life, mental health and on educational and employment outcomes (Boyle et al., 2023; Klein and Hood, 2004; McAllister et al., 2012; Iverach and Rapee, 2014; Iverach et al., 2016; Gerlach et al. 2018; O'Brian et al., 2022).
- children and adults who stammer will use more health resources overall than people who do not stammer including hospitalisation, use of medication and consultation with mental health professionals (Norman et al., 2023) This will mean greater cost to the NHS.

Workforce

To provide adequate care for people who stammer, each speech and language therapy service should ensure an appropriate level of clinical knowledge and skill mix across the workforce. This includes a combination of speech and language therapists who:

- work with a general caseload
- allocate specific time to stammering
- possess highly specialised expertise in stammering

It is advisable for services to consider their current workforce skill mix for stammering in terms of access to specialist practitioners e.g. for shadowing, mentoring and supervision opportunities.

Recommendations for future research

Children and Young People

Priorities for research about stammering in children and young people have been identified through a partnership between The James Lind Aliance and Action for Stammering Children. Topics suggested for research can be summarised as exploring the most effective forms of speech and language therapy and how families and teachers can be trained to support children and young people. Priorities also relate to research about the causes of stammering in children, its relationship with neurodivergent conditions and the triggers for increases in stammering. Research about the impact of stammering on children and young people's emotional and psychological wellbeing and performance at school and their prospects for further training education and employment was seen as key.

Stammering-affirming practice

New stammering affirming approaches for supporting children, young people and adults have emerged in recent years. Dedicated research, including a systemic review, aimed at analysing the impact and efficacy of stammering affirming therapy will help to develop an evidence-based approach and support more informed decision making for therapists and people who stammer.

Training standards and competency

It is recommended that in future a competency framework, training log and associated guidance are developed.

Acknowledgements

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The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. As well as providing leadership and setting professional standards, the RCSLT facilitates and promotes research into the field of speech and language therapy, promotes better education and training of speech and language therapists, and provides its members and the public with information about speech and language therapy.

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