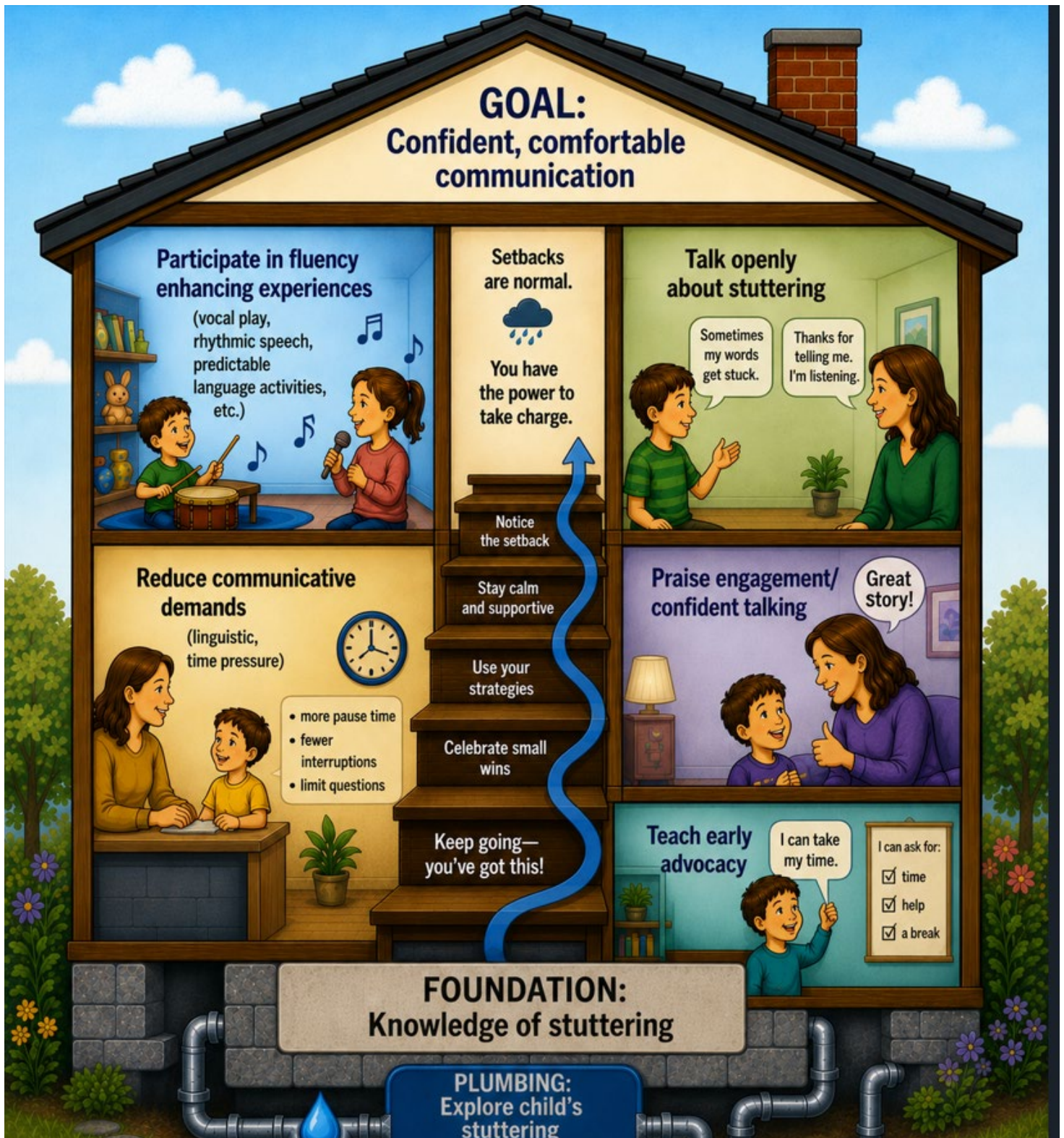


Supporting Preschoolers who Stutter: The HOME Guide

(Honor the message, Offer full attention, Make Space for Talking, Empower Communication)



See accompanying handout for details and research support.

Supporting Preschoolers Who Stutter:

The HOME Guide

(for speech-language pathologists)

The HOME Guide is designed to help families support a preschooler's communication in ways that build confidence, comfort, participation, and resilience—not simply fluent speech. Families do not cause stuttering. However, families have tremendous power to create communication environments that help children feel safe, successful, and joyful when talking. The goal of this guide is to support speech-language pathologists in developing treatment plans that foster confident, comfortable communication while also giving families a simple visual framework to better understand therapy goals and ways they can support communication at home. Research suggests that excessive pressure for fluency, rapid conversational demands, emotional stress, or negative speaking experiences may increase struggle or avoidance in some children who stutter. In contrast, supportive interactions and positive communication experiences can support easier talking over time. (Millard et al., 2009)

Young children's communication abilities are also closely tied to regulation, attention, fatigue, and stress. Good sleep habits, nutrition, predictable routines, and emotionally regulated environments can support a child's overall capacity for comfortable communication. Families can support easier talking by slowing the pace of interaction, allowing turn-taking, and prioritizing connection over performance. They can honor their child's message rather than focusing on moments of stuttering, offer full and attentive listening, make space for talking through pauses and paced turn-taking, and empower their child's confidence with praise for participation, engagement, and self-advocacy. Parent-child interaction approaches have shown positive effects on communication and stuttering outcomes in preschool children. (Ntourou, K. et al, 2013; Millard et al, 2009)

Foundation: Knowledge of Stuttering

The foundation of the home is knowledge of stuttering. Knowledge helps families replace fear, guilt, and confusion with understanding and confidence. When families learn about how stuttering develops, how variable it can be, and how children may react emotionally to communication challenges, they are better prepared to support their child calmly and effectively. Knowledge is power—it helps families respond thoughtfully rather than react out of worry or urgency. Understanding stuttering also helps families advocate for their child and explain stuttering to teachers, relatives, babysitters, and others who play an important role in the child's life. Research consistently supports that family education and involvement are important parts of early childhood stuttering intervention. (Reeves et al., 2022)

Plumbing: Explore the Child's Stuttering

The plumbing represents helping families notice situations, environments, and interaction styles that may either exacerbate or diminish stuttering. Families may observe that communication becomes easier during relaxed, playful, predictable interactions and more difficult during periods of excitement, fatigue, fast-paced conversation, interruptions, emotional stress, or increased language demands. Exploring these patterns can help families intentionally create more fluency-enhancing communication experiences while reducing factors that may increase communicative stress when possible. This process empowers parents to thoughtfully modify the environment—not to eliminate stuttering entirely, but to support more comfortable, confident communication.

Research suggests that emotional regulation, linguistic demands, and environmental stressors may interact with stuttering variability in preschool children. (Smith & Weber, 2017)

Room: Teach Early Advocacy and Confidence

As children develop awareness of stuttering, families can help them build simple advocacy skills. Preschoolers can learn that it is okay to take their time, ask for help, say “my words got stuck,” or continue talking even when speech is bumpy. These early experiences build resilience and reduce fear surrounding communication. The long-term goal is not perfection—it is confident, comfortable participation in everyday life. (Reeves et al, 2022)

Room: Reduce Communicative Demands

This room reminds families to reduce time pressure and communicative stress during conversations. Helpful strategies may include:

- More pause time
- Fewer interruptions
- Limiting rapid-fire questions
- Slowing the pace of family conversations
- Allowing the child to finish their thoughts

Importantly, reducing communicative demands does **not** mean lowering expectations for the child’s ideas, intelligence, or participation. Instead, it means creating conversational conditions that support easier communication. For example, asking children questions is a great way to develop language skills; however, rapid fire, fast-paced questions may add to communicative pressure. Parents can listen without distraction, pause before responding to the child, and slow the pace of interactions in a natural way to reduce pressure. Research on emotional regulation, linguistic load, and communicative stress supports the idea that increased demands may influence stuttering variability in young children. (Starkweather & Gottwald, 1990; Yaruss et al, 2006; Millard et al, 2009)

Room: Praise Engagement and Communication

Families are encouraged to praise participation, storytelling, persistence, creativity, eye contact, and communication confidence rather than only fluent speech. Comments such as “Great story!” or “I love hearing your ideas” reinforce the value of communication itself. Parents can focus more on what the child is saying rather than how they say it. Overemphasis on fluency may unintentionally increase monitoring, tension, frustration, or avoidance. The goal is for children to experience talking as meaningful, enjoyable, and successful—even when stuttering occurs. Preschool treatment literature supports the importance of supportive parent responses and positive communicative experiences. (Millard, 2018)

Room: Participate in Fluency-Enhancing Experiences

This room focuses on creating communication experiences that feel easier and more enjoyable. Singing, rhythmic language, playful turn-taking, reading together, pretend play, routines, and slowed conversational pacing can support easier talking for many children. The emphasis is on facilitating joy for talking—not chasing perfect fluency. Children benefit most when communication feels successful regardless of whether stuttering occurs. Evidence from preschool stuttering intervention research supports the effectiveness of supportive parent-delivered interactions and fluency-enhancing communication environments. (Smith & Weber, 2017; Starkweather & Gottwald, 1990; Millard et al, 2018)

Room: Talk Openly About Stuttering

Children often benefit when trusted adults acknowledge stuttering calmly and comfortably. Open discussion helps reduce shame and teaches children that stuttering is something they can talk about safely. Families can model acceptance by responding to stuttering with patience, attention, and reassurance rather than urgency or correction. Open communication may help prevent the development of avoidance or negative reactions to talking. Modern stuttering frameworks increasingly emphasize emotional safety, participation, and communication confidence alongside fluency outcomes. Parents almost always report that reactive symptoms of stuttering, such as tension, struggle, or frustrated comments about speech, are reduced once parents make stuttering an allowable subject for discussion. (Bernstein-Ratner, 2004)

Stairs: Returning to the HOME Guide During Setbacks

One of the most important parts of this model is that families can always return to the HOME Guide when communication becomes more difficult. Periods of increased stuttering or frustration are common in preschool children and may occur during illness, fatigue, transitions, growth spurts, emotional stress, or increased language demands. Families can revisit the foundational supports—slowing the pace, prioritizing connection, reducing pressure, protecting routines, and increasing supportive communication interactions. This gives families an active, hopeful role during periods of increased stuttering or frustration. Stuttering variability and the interaction between emotional, linguistic, and environmental factors are well documented in preschool research.

References:

- Bernstein-Ratner, N. (2004) Caregiver-Child Interactions and Their Impact on children's Fluency: Implications for Treatment. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, Vol 35, Issue 1.
- Millard, S., Zebrowski, P., Kelman, E. (2018) Palin Parent-Child Interaction Therapy: The Bigger Picture. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, Volume 27, Number 3S
- Millard, S., Edwards, S., Cook, F. (2009) Parent-child interaction therapy: Adding to the evidence. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, Vol 11, Issue 1
- Ntourou, K., Conture, E., Walden, T. (2013) Emotional reactivity and regulation in preschool-age children who stutter. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, Vol 38, Issue 3
- Reeves, N, Flynn, T., Schuff, R. (2022) Ableism to Empowerment: Navigating School Structures When Working With Students Who Stutter. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, Volume 54, Issue 1
- Smith, A. & Weber, C. (2017) How Stuttering Develops: The Multifactorial Dynamic Pathways Theory. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, Volume 60, Number 9
- Starkweather, C. W., & Gottwald, S. R. (1990). The demands and capacities model: II. Clinical applications. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 15(3), 143–157.
- Yaruss, J.S., Coleman, C., Hammer, D. (2006) Treating Preschool Children Who Stutter: Description and Preliminary Evaluation of Family-Focused Treatment Approach. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, Vol 37, Issue 2

Supporting Your Preschooler Who Stutters:

The HOME Guide

(for parents & caregivers)

The HOME Guide was created to help you support your child's communication in ways that build confidence, comfort, participation, and resilience—not just fluent speech. You did not cause your child's stuttering. But you *do* have tremendous power to create communication experiences that help your child feel safe, successful, connected, and joyful when talking.

The goal of this guide is confident, comfortable communication.

Research suggests that pressure to “talk smoothly,” fast-paced conversations, emotional stress, or negative speaking experiences may make stuttering more difficult for some children. In contrast, supportive conversations and positive communication experiences can help talking feel easier over time.

Young children's communication is closely connected to things like attention, emotions, tiredness, and stress. When you provide calm routines, good sleep habits, emotional support, and predictable interactions, you help support your child's overall ability to communicate comfortably.

You can make a powerful difference by:

- **Honoring** your child's message (instead of focusing on stuttering)
- **Offering** your child your undivided attention (when possible)
- **Making** space for talking with lots of pauses and calm turn-taking
- **Empowering** confident communication by praising participation and communication effort

Small changes in everyday interactions can have a big impact over time.

Foundation: Knowledge of Stuttering

The foundation of the HOME Guide is understanding stuttering. The more you learn about stuttering, the more you can replace fear, guilt, and uncertainty with confidence and understanding.

You may notice that your child's stuttering changes from day to day. Some days may feel easier, while other days may feel more difficult. This variability is very common. Learning about stuttering helps you respond calmly and thoughtfully instead of reacting from worry or urgency.

Your knowledge also helps you advocate for your child and explain stuttering to teachers, relatives, babysitters, and other important adults in your child's life.

Knowledge truly is power—and your calm understanding helps your child feel safer and more supported.

Plumbing: Exploring Your Child's Stuttering

The plumbing represents learning about the situations that may make talking easier or harder for your child.

You may notice that communication feels easier during calm, playful, predictable moments and harder during times of excitement, fatigue, interruptions, emotional stress, or fast-paced conversations.

As you notice these patterns, you can intentionally create more communication experiences that feel successful and comfortable for your child. This does *not* mean you need to eliminate stuttering or control every environment. Instead, it means you are learning how to support communication in thoughtful, empowering ways.

You are becoming an expert on your child's communication—and that matters.

Room: Teach Early Advocacy and Confidence

As your child becomes more aware of stuttering, you can help them build simple self-advocacy skills and communication confidence.

Your child can learn that it is okay to:

- Take their time
- Ask for help
- Say “my words got stuck”
- Keep talking even when speech feels bumpy

These experiences help your child build resilience and reduce fear around communication.

The long-term goal is not perfect speech. The goal is helping your child grow into someone who feels confident participating, expressing ideas, and connecting with others.

Room: Reduce Communication Pressure

This room reminds you to reduce time pressure and communication stress during conversations.

Helpful strategies may include:

- Using more pause time
- Interrupting less
- Asking fewer rapid-fire questions
- Slowing the pace of family conversations
- Allowing your child to finish their thoughts

Reducing pressure does *not* mean lowering expectations for your child's intelligence, ideas, or participation. It simply means creating conversations that feel calmer and easier to manage.

For example, asking questions is wonderful for language development—but many fast-paced questions in a row can sometimes add pressure. You can help by pausing, listening fully, and allowing conversations to unfold more naturally.

Your child does not need to rush to be heard.

Room: Praise Engagement and Communication

One of the most powerful things you can do is praise communication itself—not just fluent speech.

You can celebrate:

- Storytelling
- Participation
- Creativity
- Persistence
- Eye contact
- Confidence
- Sharing ideas

Helpful comments might sound like:

- “I love hearing your ideas.”
- “That was such a great story!”
- “Thank you for telling me about that.”

When you focus more on *what* your child says rather than *how* they say it, you help communication feel meaningful, enjoyable, and successful.

Your child deserves to feel proud of communicating—even when stuttering happens.

Room: Participate in Fluency-Enhancing Experiences

This room focuses on creating communication experiences that feel easier, more relaxed, and more enjoyable for your child.

Many children benefit from:

- Singing
- Reading together
- Pretend play
- Rhythmic language games
- Playful turn-taking
- Predictable routines
- Slower-paced conversations

The goal is not chasing perfect fluency. The goal is creating joyful communication experiences where your child feels successful, connected, and confident.

When talking feels safe and enjoyable, children are often more willing to participate and express themselves freely.

Room: Talk Openly About Stuttering

Your child benefits when stuttering can be talked about openly, calmly, and comfortably.

When you acknowledge stuttering with patience and acceptance, you help reduce shame and show your child that stuttering is safe to talk about. Open conversations can prevent fear, tension, or avoidance from growing over time.

You do not need to have perfect answers. Simply creating a safe space for communication is incredibly meaningful.

Many parents notice that once stuttering becomes an acceptable topic in the home, children show less frustration, tension, and struggle around talking.

Stairs: Returning to the HOME Guide During Difficult Times

One of the most important parts of the HOME Guide is remembering that you can always return to these supports when communication becomes more difficult.

Periods of increased stuttering are very common in preschool children. You may notice more stuttering during times of:

- Illness
- Fatigue
- Big transitions
- Emotional stress
- Growth spurts
- Increased language demands

During these times, you can return to the basics:

- Slow the pace
- Prioritize connection
- Reduce pressure
- Protect routines
- Increase supportive communication interactions

You do not need to “fix” every moment of stuttering. Your steady support, patience, and encouragement are already helping your child build confidence and resilience. You are creating a home where communication matters more than perfection—and that is incredibly powerful.