



A partnership between the Department of Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC and the Department of Communication Science and Disorders at the University of Pittsburgh

Stuttering Center of Western Pennsylvania

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Helping Children Who Stutter Develop Healthy Communication Attitudes

Stuttering can have a profound impact on a child's ability to succeed in academic and social endeavors, but this does not have to be the case. The extent to which a child experiences negative consequences from stuttering is determined largely by the way he or she *reacts* to stuttering. In other words, it is not the number of times a person stutters that determines whether he will have difficulty communicating—it is the way he *feels* about himself and his communication abilities that makes the differences.

Because of the critical role that the child's reactions play in the development of stuttering, one of the best things we can do for children is *to help them develop healthy, appropriate communication attitudes*. This minimizes the chance that they will develop the negative self-image, shame, or embarrassment that affect many older children, adolescents, and adults who stutter. This is true even if the child is likely to outgrow stuttering.

Young children's self-esteem is highly dependent upon the approval of their parents and others in their environment. To help children develop healthy communication attitudes, therefore, it is important for family members to convey **complete acceptance** of the child—including acceptance of his or her speaking abilities.

Of course, no parent would choose to have his or her child stutter. If a parent conveys the idea that disfluencies and stuttering are bad, however, the child is more likely to develop negative attitudes about his or her speaking abilities. When a child feels bad about his speech, he is more likely to struggle as he tries to be fluent. The physical tension associated with stuttering may worsen, and the severity of the disorder will increase. Thus, healthy attitudes are not only important for the child's social, emotional, and educational development—acceptance also helps to minimize the likelihood that the disorder will become more severe.

The best way to prevent the development of negative reactions is to help the child accept the fact that he is stuttering so he can cope with it in a matter-of-fact way. Addressing children's reactions to stuttering and working on self-acceptance does *not* mean that we are "giving up" on fluency – we will certainly work to improve fluency in therapy and at home. Our goal is to help the child maintain positive attitudes *while* improving fluency – healthy attitudes and good fluency are both critical aspects of successful communication, and neither will be completely successful by itself.

Although many parents readily acknowledge the importance of helping their children develop healthy speech attitudes, they might still have difficulty accepting their children's stuttering in their own minds. Parents have understandable fears about how stuttering might affect their children's educational, social, or occupational opportunities if it were to continue into adulthood.

Still, it is impossible for parents to convey acceptance of their child's speaking abilities if they harbor negative attitudes of their own. Some parents have difficulty overcoming their belief that stuttering sounds "bad," saying they "can't stand to listen to their child" when he is stuttering. Other parents feel that they don't need to change their own attitudes toward stuttering because they think their child will get better soon anyway. Although these are understandable responses, it is important to remember that children learn *how* to react to stuttering from watching how their parents react. If parents show signs of frustration, fear, or annoyance, the child is more likely to show similar reactions. In addition to increasing the child's concerns about his fluency, such reactions may also increase the severity of his stuttering.

To help parents overcome their discomfort about their child's stuttering, we often ask how they would like their children to react to their stuttering if it were to continue into adulthood. Parents typically indicate that they would like their children to see the speech disorder as only one part of who they are, to view stuttering as "no big deal," and not to let stuttering prevent them from pursuing their life's goals. In other words, they want their children to maintain a good self-concept about themselves and their speech even though they stutter. Parents' attitudes toward stuttering play a critical role in helping the child develop healthy attitudes.

There are many ways parents can help themselves come to terms with stuttering. Many parents benefit from speech therapy programs that include both child-focused treatment and parent-focused treatment. Children learn to speak more fluently, while simultaneously becoming more comfortable with stuttering. Parents, meanwhile, have an opportunity to discuss their concerns about their children's speech with a clinician who specializes in stuttering or with other parents of children who stutter.

Another way parents can become more accepting of their children's speech is to participate in support groups for people who stutter, such as *Friends: The Association for Young People Who Stutter* and the *National Stuttering Association*. Both of these groups provide support for children who stutter and their parents, and provide numerous models of people who stutter who are also successful communicators. The NSA also has local support group chapters just for parents and their children to help them learn to deal effectively with stuttering. (For more information about these groups, call 800 We Stutter [937-8888] or visit their website at www.WeStutter.org.)

Beyond overcoming their own discomfort about stuttering, there are many things parents can do to more directly help children develop normal, healthy communication attitudes. For example, we have found it helpful for parents to: (a) model a calm and objective response to children's stuttered speech; (b) listen to children's concerns about speaking and focus on their message, rather than on the way they are talking; and, when appropriate, (c) talk with children about stuttering in a matter-of-fact, supportive way so they will understand what is happening when they have difficulty talking. Typically, parents will be taught how to use these techniques in a speech therapy program that involves parent training or counseling sessions.

These techniques should be used sparingly, and only as appropriate for helping children feel more comfortable with their speaking abilities. We generally do not recommend them for young children who are not concerned about their stuttering (though it is still important to convey acceptance for every child who stutters). For children who are exhibiting signs of awareness or concern about stuttering, however, we have found these techniques helpful for minimizing the likelihood that they will develop strong negative reactions to their speech or stuttering.

Above all, remember that these techniques should be used *in conjunction with* treatment to reduce the child's stuttering. The ultimate goal is to prevent the child from developing negative reactions, while simultaneously improving fluency in speech treatment. If you have any questions about this approach or about your child's speech, please discuss them with a licensed, certified speech-language pathologist who is also a specialist in diagnosing and treating childhood stuttering.