

# **The School-Age Child Who Stutters: Information for Educators**

Teachers are an important part of a child's environment. For children who stutter, a teacher's understanding and support are critical in determining what the child's experience with stuttering will be.

## **What Is Stuttering?**

In brief, stuttering is a disruption in the forward flow of speech.

## **What Do We Know About Stuttering?**

- To date, we do not know what causes stuttering. There are many theories, but no definitive causation has been found.
- Stuttering is not caused by past psychological or physical trauma. In other words, stuttering is not an emotional disorder.
- Stuttering is not linked to intelligence. Children who stutter do not have lower intelligence than their peers do because they stutter.
- Studies regarding the prevalence of stuttering have demonstrated on average a rate of approximately 1% of the population. Current estimations are that over 3 million Americans stutter.
- Stuttering is a cyclic and variable disorder. These "good and bad days" add to the mystery surrounding stuttering.
- Many children who exhibit beginning signs of stuttering in preschool years do "grow through" it. However, we can not predict which children will and won't develop normal fluency. Therefore, early assessment, diagnosis, and treatment are recommended.

## **What Is the Child Feeling?**

Just as every child is different, every child who stutters is different. Some children do not react negatively to stuttering. But, it is important to be aware that children want to be like their peers and struggle to be like everyone else. The desire of a child who stutters to be like other children can contribute to feelings of insecurity, frustration, shame, and guilt concerning their stuttering. They may also react to the expectations held by parents, teachers, and others that they should speak like everyone else. Avoidance behaviors often result from the wish to conform to these expectations. Many children will go to great lengths to prevent their private struggle from becoming a public one.

## **What Happens in Therapy?**

Understanding the Process: Speech therapy is not a cure for stuttering. There are no instant cures. Therapy is a process of change over time. Appropriate speech therapy can help a child who stutters manage speech and make positive changes for the long term.

**Goal(s) of Therapy:** For a school-age child who has established patterns of stuttering behaviors, it is important to understand that improved fluency is a part of stuttering therapy. However, the ultimate goal of therapy is NOT perfectly fluent speech. It is **effective communication**.

The objective is to assist the child in improving the fluency he or she has, and to prevent negative emotions from becoming part of his or her stuttering experience. This means that even when the child cannot speak fluently, he or she can speak freely.

Therapy plays a dual role in the child's life; to increase speech management skills, and just as important, to create positive beliefs and feelings about talking and self.

### **How Can I Help?**

Because stuttering is not a high-incidence disorder, you may have questions about how to help a child who stutters. Children are different from one another, therefore, each child will react differently to stuttering. Every student brings a unique history to the disorder and must, therefore, be treated individually.

You may have to deal with the problems of a child who has been teased and laughed at by others, or who is reluctant to express his or her feelings about a stuttering problem. Anxiety, guilt, or embarrassment may be part of the stuttering experience, or may develop as the child grows older.

### **A Teacher's Role: You are a model of the communicative atmosphere in your classroom.**

- Provide a comfortable communication environment. You can do this by eliminating interruptions and modeling a more relaxed style of speaking.
- Exhibit positive attitudes regarding communication. This model is one of patience and acceptance of differences.
- Be an observer. As a liaison between therapy and the classroom, you can aid in therapy progress.
- Become a source of understanding and support. You are in a unique position to help the child who stutters accept himself.
- Monitor messages. Become aware of the messages that are sent by yourself and your students. Help everyone to understand that it is what someone says that is important, NOT the way in which they say it.
- Get support. You are part of a team that serves the best interest of children. Partner with parents, SLPs, and others.

### **What About Classroom Speaking Situations?**

As an educator, you are an important influence on a child's journey through the "school years." You have a vital, yet difficult job. The following are some examples of ideas from

other educators that may be helpful when dealing with stuttering in your classroom on a daily basis. Your own knowledge of this child and your own experiences are your best guide in the decision making process regarding the best course of action.

- During everyday classroom discussions, it's important to allow increased response time and encourage everyone to contribute their ideas.
- Reading aloud is a situation which may increase anxiety if the child who stutters must wait for his or her turn in the "down the row" style of turn-taking. To minimize this, you may wish to consider using random styles of turn selection. During group interaction, one must monitor the amount of collaboration that is occurring and, when possible, pair the child who stutters with easy going, patient partners who allow him to contribute equally.
- When it is time for answering questions, teachers can help by not rewarding quick call-out answers. Taking turns, modeling thinking time, and random selection styles are helpful strategies in this type of situation.
- Classroom oral presentation may pose problems for children who stutter (as well as other children in your classroom). It is important to approach these presentations in a matter-of-fact way, and to develop a plan that supports the needs of the child who stutters. Flexibility may be necessary at times, but it is important to provide opportunities for the child to be a successful contributor in the classroom.
- "Questions from peers; How do I handle them?" The best answers can only come from the child him/herself or from those who know the child best. Speak alone with the child who stutters and ask how he or she would like to handle these situations when they arise.

### **How Do I Handle Teasing?**

Teasing is a part of everyday life for children at one time or another and for various reasons. We cannot eliminate teasing. We must be prepared to empower the child who stutters with strategies for dealing with teasing on his own. The goal of these strategies must always be to best respond (instead of react) to teasing in ways that support self-esteem and confidence.

- Continue to establish a classroom atmosphere of tolerance for differences.
- Handle teasing about stuttering in the same matter-of-fact, positive way that you handle any teasing episodes.
- Discuss teasing episodes discreetly and ask the child who stutters what he needs from you.
- Teasing and bullying strategies are available from a number of sources. Enlist the help of the social work professional in your district or utilize the library system for resources.

## Helpful Suggestions When Speaking with a Person Who Stutters

1. Even though you may be trying to help, finishing sentences or filling in words are not helpful responses when speaking with someone who stutters.
2. Maintain normal eye contact and do not seem impatient, embarrassed, or alarmed. Just wait patiently and naturally until the person is finished speaking.
3. Refrain from giving advice, such as "Slow down," "Take a breath," or "Relax." These suggestions are simplistic responses to a complex problem.
4. Remember that stuttering varies. Don't be surprised when a person stutters more in some situations than in others.
5. Remember that stuttering is not caused by nervousness. While a speaker may appear nervous, keep in mind that the nervousness is a result of embarrassment about their stuttering rather than a cause for it.
6. In general, let the person know by your manner and actions that you are listening to *what* he is saying and not *how* he is saying it. Be yourself. Be a good listener.
7. If you're not sure how to respond, ask the speaker. Although some speakers may be uncomfortable talking about their speech, most will appreciate the interest.

## Where Can I Get More Information?

National Stuttering Association (NSA)  
5100 East LaPalma Avenue, #208  
Anaheim Hills, CA 92807  
800-364-1677  
[www.nsastutter.org](http://www.nsastutter.org)  
[nsastutter@aol.com](mailto:nsastutter@aol.com)

*Seminars in Speech and Language*  
Volume 14, Number 3, August 1993

*Language, Speech and Hearing Services  
in Schools*, April 1995 Issue

Stuttering Home Page  
<http://www.stutteringhomepage.com>

Stuttering Foundation of America (SFA)  
3100 Walnut Grove Road, Suite 603  
P.O. Box 11749  
Memphis, TN 38111-0749  
800-992-9392  
[www.stutteringhelp.org](http://www.stutteringhelp.org)

Free Spirit Publishing  
400 First Avenue North, Suite 616  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-1730  
[www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com)

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