

Practical Tips:

Fostering Generalization in School-Age Children Who Stutter

Generalization of skills learned in therapy poses one of the toughest challenges for school-age children who stutter. Many students have experienced the frustration of being able to use a strategy in the therapy room with relative ease yet struggling to perform the same task when they are out in the “real world.” This apparent inconsistency can cause confusion for the students, as well as for teachers, parents, and even clinicians—some may think that the child is not “trying hard enough” or practicing enough, or that the therapy is just not effective. In reality, generalization is difficult mainly due to the fact that every speaking situation a child faces is unique. Just because a child can use a specific speaking strategy in one situation doesn’t mean that he or she can use it in another situation involving different conditions, pressures, and audiences.

Plan for Generalization from the Beginning of Treatment

Clinicians can help their students transition their skills from therapy to reality by structuring therapy to support generalization from the very beginning of treatment. Every activity can be viewed as a generalization activity if we place it somewhere on a hierarchy, a list of situations ordered from easier to harder in which a child can practice his or her skills. Note that by “skills,” we mean not only the mechanical speech strategies (such as speech or stuttering modification techniques) but also those skills related to acceptance and desensitization (like voluntary stuttering or stuttering openly regardless of the level of fluency). In this way, even those activities completed within the therapy setting become part of the overall process of transitioning from the therapy room to the classroom—and beyond.

Teach Children HOW to Generalize

One of the ways we help children make this transition is to highlight the ways that therapy activities are similar to or different from the ways those activities are performed in the real world. For example, if a child is practicing easy starts during a reading activity in the therapy room, we can discuss how easy starts can also be used in a reading activity in the classroom (thereby changing the parameter of *location*.) Or, we can discuss how easy starts can be used in a spontaneous speaking activity in the cafeteria (changing both task and location). Note that this example involves a more complicated task and a more complicated setting—we help the child see how this represents an increase in levels on the hierarchy for these parameters. In therapy, we discuss all of the ways in which various parameters (such as task, location, audience, and topic) can be varied in order to make situations easier or harder, and then we brainstorm about ways to order those situations so the child’s practice activities can move more and more in the direction of true, real-world situations.

Give Plenty of Opportunities for Practice

Sometimes, small changes in the parameters of an activity can make a big difference in how closely the situation resembles a real situation your student will have to face. As the child practices manipulating these parameters, he or she is generalizing those new skills. Varied practice helps the child become more independent in applying treatment strategies in other situations, and this, of course, is the fundamental goal of generalization.

Learn More:

For more discussion about how we help children successfully achieve generalization of therapy skills to other settings, see Chapter 11 in *School-Age Stuttering: A Practical Guide* and our *Minimizing Bullying* series, available at www.StutteringTherapyResources.com.