

Summary Sheet 6B: Helping Children Who Stutter Develop Healthy Communication Attitudes



Stuttering can have an adverse impact on children's ability to succeed in academic and social endeavors, *but this does not have to be the case*. The degree to which children might experience negative consequences because of their stuttering is determined largely by the way they *react* to stuttering. It is not the number of times that people stutter that determines whether they will have difficulty communicating; it is the way they *feel* about themselves and about their communication abilities that makes the difference.

Because of the critical role that children's reactions play in their experience of stuttering, one of the best ways that parents, speech-language pathologists, and other people can help children who stutter is to support them in forming **healthy, appropriate communication attitudes**. Having good communication attitudes minimizes the likelihood that they will develop the negative self-image, shame, and embarrassment that affect many older children, adolescents, and adults who stutter. This is true even when children are young and still 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 grow up with healthy communication attitudes, therefore, it is important for parents and other family members to convey **complete acceptance** of their children, including acceptance of their speaking abilities.

Of course, no parents would choose to have their children to stutter. If parents convey the idea that disfluencies and stuttering are bad, however, then children are more likely to develop negative attitudes about their speaking abilities. When children feel bad about their speech, they are more likely to struggle as they try to be fluent or to hide stuttering. The physical tension associated with stuttering may worsen, and the severity of the disorder may increase. Thus, **healthy attitudes are not only important for children's social, emotional, and educational development; acceptance also helps minimize the likelihood that the disorder will become more severe.**



The best way to prevent the development of negative reactions is to help children accept the fact that they are stuttering, so they can cope with stuttering in a straightforward, open, and 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 children maintain positive attitudes *while* improving fluency. Healthy attitudes and enhanced fluency are both critical aspects of successful communication, and neither will be completely successful without the other.

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 children'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" when their children stutter. Other parents feel that they don't need to change their own attitudes toward stuttering because they think the stuttering will go away soon anyway. Although these are understandable responses, it is important to remember that children learn how to react to stuttering by watching how their



Developing Healthy Communication Attitudes (Cont'd)

parents react. **If parents show signs of frustration, fear, or annoyance, then children are more likely to show similar reactions.** If children's concerns increase, then their own reactions may also increase the severity of stuttering.

To help parents overcome their discomfort about 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 disorder as only one small part of who they are, to view stuttering as "no big deal," and to not let it prevent them from pursuing their dreams. In other words, **parents 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 children develop these healthy attitudes as they grow up, even in the early stages of the disorder.

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 components. In such therapies, children learn to speak more fluently, while simultaneously becoming more comfortable with stuttering. Parents, meanwhile, gain the opportunity to discuss their concerns about their children's speech with a clinician who understands 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 National Association of Young People Who Stutter (www.FriendsWhoStutter.org), the National Stuttering Association (www.WeStutter.org), and SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young (www.SAY.org). These organizations provide support for children who stutter and their parents, and they provide numerous models of people who stutter who are also successful communicators.

Beyond overcoming their own discomfort about stuttering, there are many ways that parents can directly help children develop normal, healthy communication attitudes. For example, we have found it helpful for parents to:

- **Model a calm and accepting response** to children's stuttered speech.
- **Listen to children's concerns** about speaking and focus on their message, rather than on the way they are talking.
- **Talk with children about stuttering** in a matter-of-fact, supportive way so children will understand what is happening when they have trouble 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 as appropriate to help children feel more comfortable with their speaking abilities. Children who exhibit signs of awareness or concern about stuttering can benefit from hearing directly from their parents that they are okay. This can help minimize 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 children's stuttering and improve their overall communication skills.** The ultimate goal is to prevent children from developing negative reactions to stuttering, while simultaneously working to improve their speech fluency and overall communication skills in treatment.

If parents have any questions about this approach or about their child's speech, they should discuss them with a licensed, certified speech-language pathologist who is experienced in helping children who stutter.