

Practical Tips:

Being More Open about Stuttering

Stuttering is embarrassing. This is one of the reasons that children so often try to hide their stuttering from others. They might resist saying certain sounds, change the words they say, or not say some words in an attempt to be more fluent. They might avoid some situations altogether if they think they will stutter. All of these tricks reduce children's ability to say what they want to say. When children substitute words or avoid situations, they miss the opportunity to express themselves clearly. Hiding stuttering can also increase children's feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety about saying what they meant to say. Thus, trying not to stutter can actually make stuttering worse.

Helping children reduce the desire to hide their stuttering is one of the most challenging aspects of therapy. It's also one of the most important. If we can help children become more open about the fact that they stutter, we can help them speak more easily and more effortlessly, so they can say what they want to say more consistently. Put simply, the less children try to hide their stuttering, the easier it is for them to communicate effectively.

Setting the stage for openness

When children feel ashamed about their stuttering, they are more likely to try to hide it from others. They are also more likely to use so-called secondary behaviors, like tensing their muscles, using starters like "well" or "you know," or breaking eye contact. When they feel more accepting of stuttering—that is, when they know that it is okay to stutter—they are less likely to avoid words and struggle while speaking. Thus, reducing children's negative emotions about stuttering lays the groundwork for increased openness and better communication. This is where you come in: SLPs can play a pivotal role in helping children decrease shame and increase acceptance of stuttering.

Several therapy strategies help children change the way they think about stuttering. Learning that stuttering is not their fault helps them reduce the shame underlying the desire to hide. Voluntary stuttering or pseudostuttering helps them see that they can tolerate disfluencies. And, acknowledging stuttering to others through self-disclosure helps them understand that other people are not as judgmental as they feared. At first, these activities are not easy to do, with your guidance, your students will find that they can be more open about stuttering than they ever believed possible. The freedom that comes with this feeling of openness is hard for us to imagine, but if you've ever started to come to terms with a problem that has plagued you throughout your life, you have some idea of the triumph that children can feel when they learn that they don't have to be ashamed of themselves or how they speak.

Many opportunities for openness

There are many special events during the year that can help people be more open about stuttering. Of course, May is *Better Hearing and Speech Month*, and *National Stuttering Awareness Week* occurs during the second week in May. October 22nd is *International Stuttering Awareness Day*, when people around the world host events to spread the word that stuttering is nothing to be ashamed of. These celebrations provide the ideal opportunity for children, their parents, and you as the therapist to talk to others about stuttering and bring stuttering out into the open.

Still, there's no need to wait for a special event to show people that stuttering is okay. Every time your students talk, they have the opportunity to be more open about stuttering. Every time they resist the temptation to avoid saying a word, every time they say exactly what they want to say, and every time they acknowledge stuttering to others, they get a little closer to freeing themselves from the burden of stuttering. Openness leads to a greater sense of control, fewer negative emotions, less severe stuttering, and, ultimately, better communication.

For all these reasons and more, greater openness is one of the most important goals in stuttering therapy. For more ideas about helping children be more open, see Chapter 8 ("What about that stuttering iceberg?") of *School-Age Stuttering Therapy: A Practical Guide*.