

Practical Tips:

Empowering Children to Advocate for Themselves

As speech-language pathologists, we know that stuttering is a widely misunderstood communication disorder. Society is often confused about what stuttering truly is, and this can lead to negative consequences for children who stutter. Well-meaning relatives may give advice that is not helpful, such as “Slow down,” or “Take a deep breath before talking.” Strangers may be impatient with a child because they do not understand what is happening when they see someone stutter. Even teachers and others at school who see a child every day may not know how to respond to stuttering. All of this can make it harder for a child to communicate with his classmates and succeed in the educational setting.

Step One: Empowerment and Building Confidence

While we would love to be able to educate everyone in a child’s environment about stuttering or safeguard our students from all of the negative listener reactions they might face, we know that we do not have the time or the power to do so. Educational efforts by stuttering organizations and individual speech-language pathologists certainly help, but we cannot reach everyone.

Therefore, our students need to feel empowered to become their own advocates. The first step toward self-advocacy is developing the knowledge and confidence they will need to talk about stuttering with their family, in their schools, and in a wide range of social environments. Here are some tips for empowering children so they will be ready to become self-advocates. These concepts are explored in detail throughout *School-Age Stuttering Therapy: A Practical Guide*, particularly in Chapter 10, “No Child Is an Island.”

- **Learn about speaking and stuttering:** Even young children benefit from developing a better understanding of how speech is made and what happens when they stutter. This is a first step in learning to manage stuttering for the long term. And, increased knowledge leads to increased power and confidence.
- **Understand the process of therapy:** Children gain confidence in their own skills by knowing why they are doing what they are doing in therapy. By understanding the rationale for management techniques, as well as for activities designed to reduce negative reactions to stuttering, children can become more involved in problem solving. This also increases their ability to adjust to the situations they will face throughout their lives. (Our therapy “Summary Sheets” are a particularly helpful set of resources for helping children understand the rationale for *everything* they do in treatment.)
- **Say what they want to say:** What children say is more important than how they say it. Internalizing this message gives children the “fuel” they need to advocate for themselves. Children who know that their messages are valued even when they stutter are more prepared to approach challenging speaking situations with confidence, secure in the knowledge that they can say what they want to say.
- **Get involved with support:** Our students are not alone on their journeys learning to deal with stuttering. By taking advantage of resources and support activities, they can see that family, friends, teachers, and others who stutter can all become a helpful part of their team.

As children mature, the responsibility for dealing with stuttering shifts away from parents, SLPs, and caregivers to the children themselves. Empowerment means that children feel strong enough to face communication challenges with confidence and to create their own success. SLPs can plant the seeds for empowerment and self-advocacy during therapy and help parents and caregivers understand their role in the process.

Next month, we’ll continue this topic with “Step Two: Self-advocacy and Educating Others.”