

Practical Tips:

Empowering Children to Advocate for Themselves (continued)

Last month's *Practical Tip* discussed the importance of helping children prepare to advocate for themselves by increasing their feelings of empowerment and building their self-confidence. This month, we explore the next step, which is to help children educate others about their personal experience of stuttering. These concepts are explored in more detail in *School-Age Stuttering Therapy: A Practical Guide*, particularly in Chapter 10, "No Child Is an Island." More information about advocacy is found throughout our *Minimizing Bullying* series.

Step 2 Self-Advocacy and Educating Others

Many people think they know what stuttering is. When asked, they often say that stuttering involves repetitions, prolongations, or blocks. While this is certainly true, it is only a small part of the story. The child's experience of stuttering can involve so much more than just the production of speech disfluencies, which is why we always tell people that stuttering is more than just stuttering!

If the people in a child's environment (including parents, teachers, peers, and even speech-language pathologists) think that stuttering is just a "speech problem," they are not likely to understand the turmoil that dealing with stuttering can cause in a child's life. The more they understand about the true nature of stuttering, the more supportive they can be in helping the child overcome the burden of the disorder. So, one of the most important steps we can take to help children in their everyday environment is to educate others about stuttering. Our students can take a lead role in this educational process. The more independent they become in teaching others about stuttering—and about how stuttering affects them—the better equipped they will be to face all of the new situations they will encounter in their lives. Here are some ways students can advocate for themselves:

- **Teach others about stuttering:** In last month's *Practical Tip*, we talked about how students could learn facts about stuttering. Now, it's time to share that information with others! For example, they can tell their parents about the parts of the body involved in producing speech (the "speech machine"), they can share with their teachers what happens in their speech machines when they stutter, and they can begin to acknowledge to their friends that sometimes they tense up the muscles in their mouths when they talk. In addition to helping others understand stuttering at a deeper level, these activities also help improve the student's retention of information they have learned in therapy.
- **Teach others about the experience of stuttering:** Educating others does not only involve sharing facts. When children explain what it's like to live with stuttering, they help people understand why stuttering can be such a challenge. This might seem scary at first, but if they can tell their parents why they sometimes avoid talking, or if they can help their teachers understand why it's easier to talk sometimes than others, then their parents and teachers will become more accepting. This idea even extends to peers. Classroom presentations and activities that help other students understand what it's like to stutter can increase their sense of empathy for students who stutter and create a more supportive environment overall.
- **Take advantage of teachable moments:** By becoming their own advocates, children can help others understand what to do—and not do—when talking with a person who stutters. For example, they can let people know that it's not helpful to interrupt and that it's hurtful to laugh. You can role-play difficult encounters to give your students a chance to try different responses to listener's reactions. The more they can use to these situations to their advantage, the more opportunities they will have to educate others about how to respond when talking to a person who stutters. Your students will feel more empowered and develop a more supportive environment at the same time!

As speech-language pathologists, our primary goal is to ensure the well-being of our students. As we help them increase their ability to educate others and advocate for themselves, we are laying a strong foundation for them to confidently handle difficult speaking situations throughout their lives.