

## Bullying Intervention for Students Who Stutter

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Bullying has been defined as the repeated exposure to negative actions by one or more students over time.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, bullying has been the subject of much investigation. Research has shown that children who stutter are likely to experience various types of bullying. Because a child's response when bullied may reinforce continued victimization, it is necessary to provide children who stutter with beneficial strategies to use when they experience the various types of bullying behavior.

A review of the literature indicates that numerous patterns related to bullying exist. Two distinct categories of bullying behaviors have emerged within recent research:

- direct bullying characterized by open attacks on the victim (e.g., hitting, threatening)
- indirect types of bullying (e.g., shunning, spreading rumors, verbal insults)

Research has revealed that males are more likely to use direct bullying, including physical aggression, while females are more likely to use indirect forms of aggression, such as teasing, isolation, and gossiping.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent study in the United States, 13 percent of the children identified themselves as bullies, and 10.6 percent identified themselves as victims of bullying behavior.<sup>1</sup> As age increases, bullying behavior typically decreases, and several researchers have noted that the frequency of bullying appears to peak in grades 6-8.<sup>1-6</sup>

A clear picture of the stereotypes related to bullying victims is also beginning to emerge.<sup>7</sup> For example, children who are victims of bullying are often perceived to be more cautious, anxious, quiet, lonely, abandoned, insecure, unassertive, unhappy and hypersensitive than other children.<sup>1,8</sup> Interestingly, these are the same labels many individuals have used to describe people who stutter.<sup>9</sup> Many researchers have also suggested that children who stutter may be bullied because they are disfluent.<sup>7,10-12</sup>

Previous research has indicated that children who stutter frequently experience bullying behaviors, may hold lower social positions than their fluent peers, are more likely to be characterized as victims of bullying, and have a higher risk of experiencing direct bullying behavior. Researchers have developed *The Peer Relationship Inventory of Children Who Stutter* to examine middle school students' perceptions about bullying and stuttering. This questionnaire also provides information regarding suggested response styles when a child experiences bullying in various forms.<sup>13</sup>

Before this scale was developed, a focus group of 12 fluent middle school students participated in an open-ended discussion to gather information regarding

perceptions about bullying and stuttering. Based on this discussion and information from the literature, the questionnaire developers administered a preliminary scale to a focus group of 12 different middle school students to determine the validity of the instrument.

To assess perceptions about bullying and stuttering, 164 fluent middle school students in grades 6-8 then completed the scale. A factor analysis of the responses to questions in the scale resulted in a final 29-question, three-factor version of the Peer Relationship Inventory of Children Who Stutter. The three factors measured *types of bullying*, *response styles* of children who stutter, and *peer and adult assistance* related to stuttering.

The majority of middle school students in the study considered teasing, being physically hurt, and being left out of activities to be types of bullying behaviors. This study also found that a high percentage (63.2 percent) of students surveyed agreed that children who stutter are more likely to be teased than physically hurt.

With regard to physical bullying (Direct Bullying), 48.5 percent of the students agreed that children who stutter are often "ganged up on" by other children, 48 percent agreed that they are physically hurt, and 18 percent have observed children who stutter being physically hurt. These students also reported that indirect forms of bullying behavior occur more frequently than direct types. A majority agreed that children who stutter are teased (70.1 percent), made fun of (67.7 percent), imitated (66.9 percent), and left out of activities (59.8 percent). More than half (56.4 percent) indicated a child who stutters is more likely to be teased than left out of activities.

Nearly 15 percent of the middle school students surveyed reported that they had personally made fun of a child who stutters, 57.3 percent had seen children who stutter being teased about their speech. Furthermore, 35 percent of survey participants indicated seeing a child who stutters being left out of activities. Results of this survey and a review related literature has indicated that children who stutter are likely to experience both indirect and direct types of bullying.

Negative stereotypes may place children who stutter at a greater risk of being bullied in school. However, when asked if children who stutter would be bullied less if they were less shy, only a third of the students agreed.<sup>13</sup> These results indicate that changing the perceptions about the personality of children who stutter alone may not be sufficient to reduce bullying.

It is important that children who stutter have strategies to employ when they experience bullying behavior because their response actually may reinforce continued victimization. Students have identified several strategies they believe would reduce subsequent bullying instances.<sup>13</sup> Most agreed that children would be bullied less if they

stuttered less severely (56.5 percent) and received speech therapy to reduce stuttering severity (53 percent).

Apart from improving fluency, the students identified several other strategies that children who stutter could use to reduce bullying:

- discuss stuttering with classmates in a positive way (40 percent),
- have a teacher discuss stuttering with classmates (52.5 percent);
- tell an adult when they are teased (85.5 percent);
- find another group of friends if they are left out of activities (74.4 percent); and
- avoid (77.4 percent) and ignore (60.7 percent) those who physically hurt them.

A majority of the study participants also reported that children who stutter should not fight back if they are teased and should not walk away if they are left out of activities. They suggested that bullying could be reduced if children who stutter improve their fluency, attend speech therapy to reduce stuttering severity, inform an adult about bullying instances, and discuss stuttering with classmates.

While no child is immune to the potential of becoming a victim of bullying, children who stutter are more susceptible and vulnerable to this behavior. It is important to remember that every child will have his/her own personal style of communication and level of comfort with each response style.

Clinicians, parents, and educators should individualize bullying intervention for each child. It is necessary to take a preventative approach for children not being bullied and a management approach for those who are. By encouraging children who stutter to make positive proactive and reactive responses when dealing with bullying, we can promote a healthier educational experience for all students.

## References

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