

Ask the Expert

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A recent parent study conducted by the NSA indicated that parents become less involved in their child's stuttering therapy and supportive therapy (practicing at home) as their children get older and become teenagers. The NSA's John Tetnowski, Board Recognized Fluency Specialist and Mentor and Chair of the National Stuttering Association Research Committee discusses some of the reasons this may occur and addresses parents concerns.

In my 20-plus years of clinical experience of working with people who stutter, I feel that I can add some clinical insights to the data that we collected. The group of people that we are talking about (teens and pre-teens) can be particularly tough to work with, but the group that I enjoy working with the most. There are a few points that I think are really important:

1) Teaching is one of the most important roles. The Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) needs to work with the CWS (children who stutter) to help them understand what is going on. It is not just about *fluency*, nor is it just about *acceptance*. They must be educated about the whole process. Why it's tough to talk, why others might tease them, etc. I think that almost half of each session with kids this age is about education and getting their feedback.

2) The teaching role is also important with the parents. If we bring the parents into each session, we have taken away their child's responsibility. I gave this example just the other day at a conference. Therapy is like the middle school and high school science projects that we see. If the parents build most of the project, it looks great, but the teen has learned very little. The best learning occurs when the parents watch and help, but the teen builds the project by themselves. This promotes maximum long-term learning. This is the same with stuttering therapy. We need to encourage and help our teens, not just do it for them. Just to let you know, I have a 13-year old daughter myself! She does not stutter, but she has her own struggles, so I understand that explaining to a child or teen that they should do something for the sake of "it will do you lots of good" or "it's the right thing to do" or "do it because I said so" is not as simple as it sounds.

There is no *one* way to implement therapy with teens, but rather several components that should be part of the therapeutic model, including strong relationship(s) between parent, child, and SLP. It is also important to recognize that stuttering will have an impact on your child's life. They will be teased, they will be less successful at some tasks temporarily, and they may need to be STRONGER than they would have to be if they did not stutter. There is even some research that shows there is a "stuttering temperament," showing that PWS are more reactive to failure/teasing, etc. (Anderson, et al., 2003). We at the NSA see lots of positive examples of people who will get up and speak in any situation and succeed at it in spite of their stuttering. It is important to realize that they are the exception, and that it has not always been that way for them.

As you and your child work through this process, there will be many lessons learned along the way. Here is one of the best parallels from Walt Manning's text (2009) and he talks about stuttering and lessons learned from rock climbing (Note: The original parallels were provided by a 14 year old!).

Treatment generalizations (from "Lessons Learned During Rock Climbing" Manning, 2009, p.409)

- You have to learn.....then practice.
- You have to take on more responsibility.
- You have to trust the other person.
- Effective communication is essential.
- You have to conquer your fear.
- It is OK to make mistakes.
- It's OK to get frustrated, eventually you will get it.
- It's OK if you fall.
- If you fall all the way down, start over again.
- Remain calm.
- When you're facing the edge, have faith in your support.
- You just have to find the right rocks.

SLP's are important here, and along with parents and NSA groups act as the support mentioned in the second last statement. We need to build up our kids, but help them to remember that "It's OK to fall." We should expect the SLPs to be the guides that help kids and parents to find the "right rocks" mentioned in the last statement.

References (for more information, read these articles)

Anderson, J. D., Pellowski, M. W., Conture, E. G. & Kelly, E. M. (2003). Temperamental characteristics of young children who stutter. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 46, 1221-1233.

Manning, W.H. (2009). *Clinical Decision Making in Fluency Disorders* (3rd Edition). Clifton Park, NY: Delmar.