

How the perception of the listener impacts stuttering in early childhood

Haley Warner, M.S., CCC-SLP

New York University

ABSTRACT

People who stutter report that they do not stutter when they are alone, a phenomenon often referred to as the “talk-alone-effect.” To test the talk-alone-effect, our previous work tested private speech and found that adults who stutter do not stutter during private speech (Jackson et al., 2021). Private speech is overt speech intended only for the speaker that lacks the perception of a listener. This finding indicates the critical role of the perception of the listener in eliciting stuttering events.

Currently, it is unknown whether the perception of a listener leads to stuttering events in young children near the onset of stuttering. Perceiving a listener during a communicative exchange may have a reduced impact on children who stutter as compared to adults because: 1) young children who stutter have had fewer experiences with listener reactions to stuttering and 2) young children are still developing theory of mind, which is a precursor to social cognitive processes associated with perceiving a listener. We aim to test how the perception of the listener impacts stuttering events in young children who stutter (i.e., 3-5 years old) to determine if the finding that the perception of a listener elicits stuttering events is inherent to stuttering or develops over time.

People who stutter report that the role of the listener impacts the experience of stuttering, yet there is limited research on the relationship between stuttering and the cognitive processes associated with social interaction. The proposed project seeks to better understand how the perception of the listener impacts stuttering. This study will:

1. Determine if stuttering events occur during the private speech of young children who stutter (Aim 1). We will compare the distribution of stuttering events during private speech and social speech (i.e., overt speech with the perception of a listener) during play in both a laboratory setting and at home. We hypothesize that young children near the onset of stuttering will not stutter during private speech due to reduced interference from social cognitive processes associated with perceiving a listener.

2. Establish the relationship between theory of mind and the frequency of stuttering events in young children who stutter (Aim 2). We will test participants' theory of mind using a caregiver-informant test of theory of mind. We hypothesize a positive correlation between the capacity for theory of mind and the frequency of overt stuttering events.

Overall, the proposed project will contribute to our understanding of the impact of social cognitive processes associated with the perception of the listener on stuttering. This project is aligned with the NSA's mission because a better understanding of factors that lead to stuttering events can empower and provide hope to people who stutter by reducing misconceptions about stuttering.