AIS AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR STUTTERING
Speak Freely. Live Fearlessly.

Stuttering Information for Teachers

If you have a student in your class who stutters there's a lot you can do to make your classroom a safe and welcoming environment for their participation.

Some basic facts about stuttering:

- Stuttering is not linked to intelligence or emotional disturbance.
- Stuttering is a genetically determined disorder that is neurologic in origin.
- Stuttering occurs in roughly 1% of the adult population and around 5-7% percent of young children.
- There are no "quick fixes" for stuttering and even with early intervention, approximately 20% of children who stutter will continue to stutter into adulthood.

Effective Communication with Children Who Stutter

- **Listen patiently and maintain normal eye contact.** Convey that you are listening intently and try to keep eye contact even if the child looks away.
- **Do not finish their sentences**. Allow children to complete what they want to say, even when it seems like it is taking a long time. Do not guess at what you think they are saying. Reflect back what you have heard so they know that you have understood them; then, give them an opportunity to repair the message if necessary.
- **Do not rush children to finish**. Time pressure is often a problem for many children who stutter. When children who stutter feel a need to speak quickly, tension can build up in their speech muscles, thereby causing increased stuttering.
- **Do not give simplistic advice**. Simple suggestions such as "Slow down," "Take a deep breath," "Start over," and "Think about what you are going to say," may be well-meaning and *seemingly* helpful for children who stutter. Unfortunately, these suggestions can put unnecessary pressure on them and actually make it harder to speak.
- **Do not praise fluency but rather praise content**. When we praise a child for being fluent, we are sending the message that we prefer fluent speech, thereby suggesting it is better than stuttering. Rather, respond positively to *what* the child is saying, not *how* he or she is saying it.

The Variable Nature of Stuttering

Speech-Language Pathologists are often asked, "Why is this child more fluent on some days and struggling more on others?" The short answer is that stuttering is, by nature, both cyclical and variable. These "good days" and "bad days" add to the mystery surrounding stuttering, but they are

a fact of life for children who stutter. There are many interpersonal and environmental factors that may disrupt fluency, and it is not particularly helpful (or possible) to try to figure out what makes a child stutter more on one day and less on another. Accepting and learning to tolerate variability is an important component of the therapy process—for children as well as for those in their environment.

Secondary behaviors

When children who stutter increase tension or "push" to get words out, they may begin to push harder and harder, building tension in their facial muscles or other muscles of the body. These movements are not done on purpose; they develop naturally as the child tries anything to try push words out. Sometimes it seems that pushing helps a child talk more fluently, but most of the time, the excess tension actually contributes to the overall communication problem. As children learn to tolerate moments of stuttering, and as they find themselves in increasingly accepting environments, they usually struggle less with their speech and stutter less.

Avoidance behaviors

Some children use "tricks" in an attempt to avoid the moment of stuttering. Examples include not saying certain sounds or words, not talking to certain people, changing words when they think they are about to stutter, pretending to be confused when called upon to read or answer questions, saying, "I don't know," even when they *do*, leaving the class to go to the bathroom before it is their turn to talk, not volunteering to read or answer questions, allowing others to answer for them in group activities, and more. Children do these things because they do not want others to observe them struggling. Unfortunately, avoidances such as these actually contribute to the development of more negative ideas and emotions about stuttering, ultimately increasing the severity of the problem.

By knowing about these possibilities, you can be aware if such behaviors are present and support () by creating a safe environment where it is acceptable for her to stutter. She should be encouraged to say what she wants to say, even if it takes a bit extra time to do so.

What happens in speech therapy?

When children are enrolled in therapy, people may look for rapidly increased fluency as the primary signs of improvement. Unfortunately, there are no "quick fixes" or simple answers to dealing with stuttering in the long term. The ultimate goal of therapy for young children who stutter is *effective communication* and *confidence even when stuttering.* We seek to achieve balance between helping children change their speech behaviors and helping them learn to cope effectively with the fact that they stutter so stuttering does not hinder their ability to communicate.

In speech therapy at AIS (and elsewhere), kids may be encouraged to explore ways to modify some of the physical tension they experience when talking, and they develop a dialogue to discuss their feelings and reactions to stuttering. They may engage in activities to educate their family and friends about stuttering and openly address possible reactions from others. Most importantly, they

work to maintain full participation in all speaking contexts with minimal fear and avoidance related to talking.

The Teacher's Role: Create A Positive Communication Environment

You not only set the learning atmosphere in your classroom; you also set the communication atmosphere. You can help children who stutter by minimizing interruptions, modeling thinking and planning time, allowing increased response time, and focusing on *what* children are saying not *how* they say it. You can also consider the following specifics:

- Try to create a relaxed communicative atmosphere with minimal time and communicative pressure. You might remind your student who stutters, "It is ok if you need some extra time to talk." But again, it is best not to suggest that she/he "slow down, take a breath, or take her time."
- If another child asks about their speech, it is appropriate to say something like, "Jane/John has some bumps in their talking sometimes, and that's ok. We are going to be good listeners."
- Try to encourage good verbal turn-taking in the classroom. It is particularly disruptive to a student who stutters expression when other people interrupt them.

Thank you for your collaboration in creating the best educational environment for students who stutter.

Stuttering Information & Resources

- American Institute for Stuttering: www.stutteringtreatment.org
- Stuttering Foundation of America: www.stutteringhelp.org/teachers
- Friends: National Association for Young People Who Stutter: www.friendswhostutter.org/teachers
- National Stuttering Association: westutter.org/teachers-educators