

When Stuttering Meets Bullying

Not all children who stutter are bullied, but when they are, it can feel like a parent's worst fears about stuttering are coming true. Will they be made fun of for this? Will they have trouble making friends? Will they avoid talking because other kids respond badly to stuttering? All these worries may come rushing to the foreground when we hear that a child's speech is the object of bullying.

But parents and other concerned adults can help. Let's look at bullying and the ways we can intervene when we encounter it.

What is bullying?

The CDC defines bullying as aggressive behavior that:

- Is unwanted
- Involves a power imbalance
- Is repeated or likely to be repeated

That's not to say that other aggressive behaviors aren't negative, or that we should ignore them. But the combination of power imbalance and repetition makes bullying particularly devastating.



Bullying can take many forms. It can be **verbal**, including name-calling, threats or imitation. It can be **social**, involving exclusion, rumors or humiliation. Or it can be **physical**, manifesting as damage to someone's body or property.

Unfortunately, it is true that children who stutter experience more bullying than fluent peers, with up to 81% of children who stutter reporting bullying at some point. Without intervention, bullying can have long-term consequences like depression and anxiety, health complaints, and decreased academic achievement. If the teasing is related to stuttering, it can lead to more negative thoughts about stuttering, a setback in the process of becoming a confident communicator.

When a child comes to you about bullying

If a child tells you they are being bullied, don't panic - you can help with this! It never feels good to hear that a child you care about is being hurt. But it's also a good sign that the child feels comfortable enough with you to share their problem. In the moment, you can help by talking frankly and supportively about the problem.

- **Validate their feelings.** Resist the temptation to make it okay right away. Try validating statements like "that sounds hurtful" or "a lot of people would be really upset if that happened to them!"
- **Tell them directly** that the bullying is not okay.
- Reassure them that **they are not alone**, and you will work with them to find solutions.
- **Enlist help.** Talk to an authority figure in the situation where the bullying has occurred. Work with them on a plan.

Strategies for children

We never want to tell a child to solve the problem of bullying on their own. But while adults work to change the situation, we can also empower the child with some helpful strategies. Not every strategy will be right for every child, but you can help by talking through the possibilities to help the child find what works for them - and to practice in a safe environment.

- **Ask the bully calmly and directly to stop.** Role play assertive statements such as, "I don't like it when you do that. Please stop."
- **Seek adult help.** Reassure the child that it's okay to enlist adults when facing a bully. Adults know how to intervene without making the problem worse.
- **Get an ally.** Encourage the child to talk to one peer who will support them in facing the bully.
- **Defuse by agreeing.** "Okay, you got it, I stutter!" or similar phrases take the power out of the bully's taunts.
- **Acknowledge and redirect.** "Yep, I stuttered. Do you want to go outside now?"
- **Avoid overly emotional responses.** While it can be hard to do, showing a bully how much their words hurt can make them likelier to try again. And responding with retaliatory taunts or violence will also escalate the problem.



Strategies for teachers

- Try to **observe the behavior** directly - but be ready to intervene even if you can't spot it.
- **Talk to the bully.** Try using restorative questions:
 1. What happened?
 2. What were you thinking of at the time?
 3. What have you thought about since?
 4. How has the other person been affected?
 5. What do you think you need to do to make things right?
- **Educate yourself** about things to avoid, including zero tolerance policies, peer mediation, and group treatment.
- **Work with your school to [create a bully-free zone](#)** and collaborate with others to use resources like [Stomp Out Bullying](#), [PACER](#), and [stopbullying.gov](#) to make sure your school is proactively preventing bullying for all children.



Strategies for SLPs

For speech pathologists, good news! If you are working with a child to build confidence and comfort with their stuttering, you are already helping. One key to bullying is that bullies can only hurt us about things that we're insecure about. And there are many concrete steps you can take for the children who stutter on your caseload:

- **Look to the research.** You'll find allies who are researching the best ways for SLPs to fight bullying. For example, [Yaruss et al.](#) created a [six step approach](#) for SLPs that involves educating children, peers and adults not only about stuttering, but about bullying itself. Maureen Langevin has also published widely on evidenced-based [ways to respond to bullying](#).
- **Help the child educate others.** Work with the child to destigmatize stuttering in the classroom by giving a presentation. Here's just one example of how such a presentation might be structured. Giving a presentation about stuttering can be scary, so be mindful of whether this strategy is right for the child you're working with.
- **Teach self-advocacy** with [these tips](#) from AIS therapist Mark O'Malia.
- **Brainstorm and roleplay solutions to tough situations.** Give the child a safe environment to try out different possible responses. Make room for silly options! Help the child think through what different outcomes might be to different solutions.
- **Above all, be a safe space for stuttering**, where the child knows they can stutter as much as they want and still be celebrated as the great communicator they are.

About the American Institute for Stuttering

AIS is a leading non-profit 501(c)(3) organization whose primary mission is to provide universally affordable, expert speech therapy to people of all ages who stutter, guidance to their families, and much-needed clinical training to speech professionals wishing to gain expertise in stuttering. Our mission extends to advancing public and scholarly understanding of this often misunderstood disorder.

