

Tips for dealing with bullying and stuttering in schools

Glen Tellis, Ph.D., College Misericordia, Dallas, PA and **Jessica Link**, M.S., Sundance Rehabilitation, PA.

Researchers in many countries have systematically examined bullying in the school-age population. There are two distinct categories of bullying behaviors: direct bullying- characterized by open attacks on the victim (e.g., hitting, threatening) and indirect types of bullying such as shunning and verbal insults. Indirect bullying is reported to occur more frequently than direct bullying. Males are more likely to engage in direct bullying behaviors. Females are more likely to use indirect forms of aggression (Whitney & Smith, 1993). As age increases, children indicate that bullying behavior typically decreases (Olweus, 1997). Several researchers have noted that the frequency of bullying appears to peak in grades six through eight (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Previous research indicates that children who stutter (CWS) frequently experience bullying behavior, hold lower social positions than their fluent peers, and have a significantly higher risk for experiencing direct bullying behavior. No research has been conducted with the middle school population to determine their views about bullying and stuttering. There is also limited information about indirect forms of bullying. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to determine, (1) the perceptions that middle-school students have about the relationship between bullying and stuttering, (2) what relationship exists between bullying and stuttering as it pertains to age, gender, perceptions about stuttering, and non-physical (i.e., indirect) forms of bullying, (3) how fluent children define bullying as it applies to stuttering, and (4) what strategies fluent children suggest may help reduce bullying of children who stutter?

In the present study, the Peer Relationship Inventory of Children who Stutter (Link & Tellis, 2006) was specifically administered to middle school students.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 164 middle school students (grades 6-8). All participants were in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. There were 77 males and 87 females. Mean age was 12.58 years. The age ranged from 11 years to 14 years. From the total, 157 students were Caucasian, 2 students were African American, 1 student was Latino, and 4 students did not specify. Also, there were 37 sixth grade students, 75 seventh grade students, and 52 eighth grade students. From the total, 60.4% of the participants knew a person who stuttered.

Procedures

The Peer Relationship Inventory of Children who Stutter with 25 questions was administered to 164 middle school students. Questions in the scale were randomized. The instrument consisted of a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Factor analysis and test-retest reliability was conducted on the scale. Internal consistency measures were also obtained.

RESULTS

Three factors were obtained after completing a factor analysis on the Peer Relationship Inventory of Children who Stutter. Analysis of variance indicated that there was a significant difference between gender and Factor 3 (whether children who stutter should seek peer and/or adult assistance). The average score for males was 1.78 and for females was 1.4. These results indicate that females agree more often with the statements in this factor. Analysis of variance also indicated that there was a significant difference between grade and Factor 3. The average total score for the 6 items in Factor 3 (Peer and adult Assistance") for 6th grade students was 1.48, 7th grade students was 1.55, and 8th grade students was 1.58. Results indicate that as grade increases students disagree more about whether children who stutter should seek peer and adult assistance when they experience bullying behavior. Test-retest reliability indicated that the percentage of agreement was 91% for the data. The

Cronbach alpha coefficient of .84 indicated good internal consistency.

Across grade levels, classmates would help CWS if they are bullied; however, as grade level increases classmates are less likely to help CWS when they experience bullying behavior. From the total, 93.8% (N=152) of students consider it “bullying” when a child is “teased” because he or she stuttered. When asked if being “left out of activities” because a child stutters is considered “bullying,” 78.8% (N=128) of the students marked “yes.” From the total, 70.1% agreed that CWS are “teased” because they do not talk the same as their classmates. Also, 67.7% agreed that CWS are “made fun of” because they stutter and 66.9% agreed that it is likely for CWS to be “imitated” when they stutter. When asked if CWS are “left out of activities” by other children, 59.8% of the students agreed, 26.8% were unsure, and 13.4% disagreed. When asked if CWS would be bullied less if they were less shy, only 33.3% of respondents agreed, 41.5% were unsure, and 21.5% disagreed. From the total, 89.6% agreed that CWS should tell an adult when they are physically hurt by another child. A majority of the students also agreed that CWS should avoid (77.4%) and ignore (60.7%) the children who physically hurt them. Only 38.7% of the respondents agreed that CWS should fight back when they are physically hurt. Most students agreed that CWS should “tell an adult” when they are left out of activities. Many students agreed that CWS should find another group of friends and more than half of the students believed that CWS should avoid and ignore the children who leave them out of activities. The majority of students disagreed that CWS should walk away when they are left out of activities. With regard to response to bullying: The most strongly agreed upon response style was “telling an adult.” A majority of students also identified “avoiding” and “ignoring” the children who tease them as positive response styles. The least frequently agreed upon strategies for CWS to use when they are “teased” were “fighting back” and “walking away.”

DISCUSSION

Clinicians can use the scale: as an additional tool during assessment and/or to develop treatment goals related to improving peer relationships of CWS, to determine a client’s perspective about the types of bullying that he/she experiences, to examine the perceptions that CWS have toward their classmates’ responses when bullied, and to evaluate the beliefs that peers of CWS have toward the relationship between bullying and stuttering and identify peer suggestions to reduce bullying.