

Practical Tips:

Five Key Facts about Stuttering

Stuttering is more than just a speech disorder.

Although many people think of stuttering as primarily a speech issue, the disorder actually involves more than just repetitions, prolongations, and blocks. People who stutter may experience a variety of negative emotional reactions to the fact that they have difficulty speaking. Examples include feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, and shame, which can lead to tension and struggle while speaking or attempts to avoid talking altogether. Other people may also react negatively. For example, children who stutter are more likely to be bullied by their peers, and adults who stutter commonly report discrimination in the workplace. These reactions make it even harder for people who stutter to say what they want to say. Together, the speech disfluencies and the negative reactions can affect quality of life. Thus, we say, “*Stuttering is more than just stuttering,*” because the disorder can affect all aspects of a person’s life.

Stuttering varies.

People do not stutter the same way or the same amount in all situations. This may be one of the most frustrating aspects of the condition, for speakers cannot always predict when they will stutter and when they will be able to speak easily. Variability can also confuse parents, teachers, and peers, for they may wonder why a person is fluent in one situation but struggles in another. It is not because the speaker is not trying hard enough; it is just because *stuttering varies*. As speakers and listeners learn to expect and accept this variability, stuttering becomes easier to deal with.

Stuttering is complicated.

A century of focused research has led to many theories but only one truth: stuttering is not simple. It is not a psychological problem (though it can cause emotional distress); it is not caused by parents (though parents play an important role in how children experience stuttering); and it is not just a physical problem (though people who stutter do show subtle differences in both anatomy and physiology). Stuttering does run in families (so there is likely to be a genetic component), and it *is* associated with neurological differences (both structural and functional). *Knowing these truths can help people who stutter and their families learn to better understand what they are experiencing.*

It is okay to stutter!

People aren’t doing anything wrong when they stutter; they are simply trying to talk, just like anyone else would do. If they feel embarrassed about their speech or ashamed of being different, then they are more likely to struggle with speaking or try to avoid talking. This makes the problem worse and increases the impact of the disorder. When people know that it is okay to stutter, then they can communicate more freely and more easily. They can say what they want to say, even if they sometimes say it disfluently. Thus, *acceptance of stuttering is the key to successful communication!* Parents, teachers, friends, and others can help people who stutter by simply recognizing that what a person says is more important than how a person says it.

Treatment can help.

Although there is no universal cure for stuttering, treatment can help. Young children often overcome stuttering entirely (and many get better without treatment, though it is impossible to know which children will recover on their own and which will need help). Older children, adolescents, and adults may continue to stutter in some fashion throughout their lives, but with appropriate treatment and support, they can become effective communicators who are not held back by stuttering. *Treatment is most helpful when it focuses on more than just fluent speech.* Since stuttering is more than just stuttering, treatment for stuttering should address more than just the observable speech disfluencies. Addressing the whole disorder is the key to helping people reduce the impact of stuttering on their lives.

Practical Tips:

Being More Open about Stuttering

Stuttering is embarrassing. This is one of the reasons that children so often try to hide their stuttering from others. They might resist saying certain sounds, change the words they say, or not say some words in an attempt to be more fluent. They might avoid some situations altogether if they think they will stutter. All of these tricks reduce children's ability to say what they want to say. When children substitute words or avoid situations, they miss the opportunity to express themselves clearly. Hiding stuttering can also increase children's feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety about saying what they meant to say. Thus, trying not to stutter can actually make stuttering worse.

Helping children reduce the desire to hide their stuttering is one of the most challenging aspects of therapy. It's also one of the most important. If we can help children become more open about the fact that they stutter, we can help them speak more easily and more effortlessly, so they can say what they want to say more consistently. Put simply, the less children try to hide their stuttering, the easier it is for them to communicate effectively.

Setting the stage for openness

When children feel ashamed about their stuttering, they are more likely to try to hide it from others. They are also more likely to use so-called secondary behaviors, like tensing their muscles, using starters like "well" or "you know," or breaking eye contact. When they feel more accepting of stuttering—that is, when they know that it is okay to stutter—they are less likely to avoid words and struggle while speaking. Thus, reducing children's negative emotions about stuttering lays the groundwork for increased openness and better communication. This is where you come in: SLPs can play a pivotal role in helping children decrease shame and increase acceptance of stuttering.

Several therapy strategies help children change the way they think about stuttering. Learning that stuttering is not their fault helps them reduce the shame underlying the desire to hide. Voluntary stuttering or pseudostuttering helps them see that they can tolerate disfluencies. And, acknowledging stuttering to others through self-disclosure helps them understand that other people are not as judgmental as they feared. At first, these activities are not easy to do, with your guidance, your students will find that they can be more open about stuttering than they ever believed possible. The freedom that comes with this feeling of openness is hard for us to imagine, but if you've ever started to come to terms with a problem that has plagued you throughout your life, you have some idea of the triumph that children can feel when they learn that they don't have to be ashamed of themselves or how they speak.

Many opportunities for openness

There are many special events during the year that can help people be more open about stuttering. Of course, May is *Better Hearing and Speech Month*, and *National Stuttering Awareness Week* occurs during the second week in May. October 22nd is *International Stuttering Awareness Day*, when people around the world host events to spread the word that stuttering is nothing to be ashamed of. These celebrations provide the ideal opportunity for children, their parents, and you as the therapist to talk to others about stuttering and bring stuttering out into the open.

Still, there's no need to wait for a special event to show people that stuttering is okay. Every time your students talk, they have the opportunity to be more open about stuttering. Every time they resist the temptation to avoid saying a word, every time they say exactly what they want to say, and every time they acknowledge stuttering to others, they get a little closer to freeing themselves from the burden of stuttering. Openness leads to a greater sense of control, fewer negative emotions, less severe stuttering, and, ultimately, better communication.

For all these reasons and more, greater openness is one of the most important goals in stuttering therapy. For more ideas about helping children be more open, see Chapter 8 ("What about that stuttering iceberg?") of *School-Age Stuttering Therapy: A Practical Guide*.

Practical Tip:

Creating a Speech Notebook for Stuttering Therapy

Note: These ideas will have more impact if you read our book, [*School-Age Stuttering Therapy: A Practical Guide*](#). We discuss the speech notebook in Chapter 5, and the specific contents of the speech notebook are described in detail throughout the book.

Helping students create their own speech notebook is one of the first things we do in stuttering therapy. Why? Because **speech notebooks enhance therapy for our students** (and ourselves)!

- Speech notebooks support portfolio documentation of therapy topics, activities, and accomplishments
- Speech notebooks help students see their progress over time
- Speech notebooks allow for more effective collaboration with parents and teachers

Of course, speech notebooks are not a new concept, but we find that clinicians don't always get the most out of them. The good news is that there are no rules about how you can use speech notebooks to help your students who stutter. Here are a few helpful tips for incorporating speech notebooks into your own therapy with children who stutter:

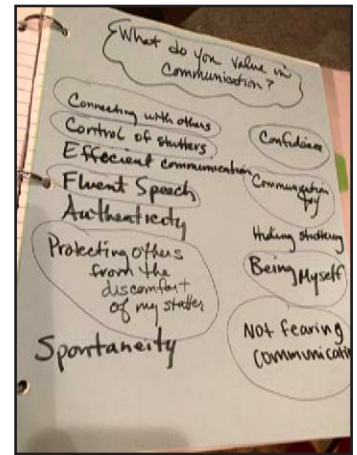
- Use whatever is most economical and flexible for your students and your style of therapy. We often use a typical ruled notebook, but you can also use binders. Let your children's creativity to shine through as, together, you build their very own encyclopedia of stuttering and stuttering therapy.
- Send the notebook home with students to support practice and documentation, and so they can teach others about what they are learning.
- Use colorful paper to have special pages "jump."
- Use page flags for homework or special pages you want to return to.
- Write in the notebook each and every session and *use it while the session is in progress*.
- Make sure that you are not doing all of the writing. When students are able, they should record some of the ideas and activities that come up in therapy.
- Be flexible: some sessions may have short entries; others may have pages of therapy documentation.
- Don't try to be neat and tidy; GET CREATIVE and have fun with the entries!
- Use the entries as review and reminders when students forget concepts. The notebook can become a reference guide for children's deeper understanding of stuttering and therapy.

Here are some examples of how we organize our students' speech notebooks. Remember, there are no rules. You can find your own ways to help your students track their progress.

Inside Front Cover: Anatomy and physiology of how the speech system ("speech machine") works, adapted to the student's age and cognitive ability.

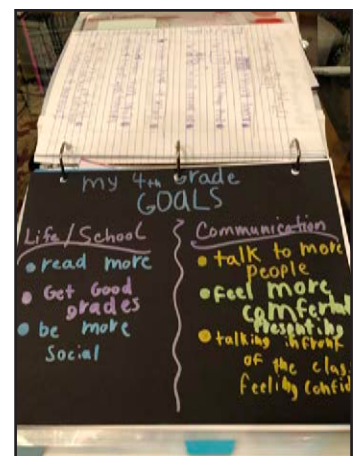
Inside Pages: (If you use a binder, recent entries will be on top, so you won't have to flip through to find current work.)

- Ongoing session notes (written by you and by the student)
- Student reflections, journal entries, and writing assignments
- Some homework assignments (including space for the student to keep notes)
- Questions for parents and teachers (with space for responses)



Back Sections:

- Reference materials, including summary sheets explaining strategies, facts about stuttering, guides for practicing
- Progress tracking forms, assessment worksheets, student reflections, and clinician/parent/teacher observations
- Glossary of vocabulary items, such as hierarchy, self-monitoring, desensitization, self-disclosure, acceptance, etc.
- Any other special pages that you want to have easy access to.



Inside Back Cover: Speech handling techniques mapped out visually for easy reference

Finally, we put key **homework** assignments from [School-Age Stuttering Stuttering Therapy](#) on top of the notebook, then rubber band them in place so they are easily visible and don't get lost and forgotten!

