Guidelines for Teachers of Students Who Stutter

Teachers are essential communication facilitators for students who stutter. An encouraging relationship built on trust and understanding promotes fluency in the classroom. Students who stutter benefit from specific classroom modifications, which teachers can make without calling undue attention to the speech difficulty.

While the cause of stuttering has yet to be identified, it is clear that students experience speech disruptions when internal or external (environmental) demands exceed their capacity to handle the communication situation. Although individual dynamics vary widely, many students who stutter report the following phenomena.

They are more likely to stutter under these conditions:
- They think about their speech and struggle to control it.
- They feel rushed to communicate.
- They perceive their listener as impatient, negative, or judgmental.
- They place high demands for speech and general performance accuracy on themselves.
- They develop a self-concept as a “stutterer.”
- They anticipate and predict speech difficulty.
- They view speaking as a performance rather than as a spontaneous act of self-expression.

They are more likely to experience increased fluency under these conditions:
- They are spontaneous and assertive in their interactions.
- They are confident about speaking and handling stuttering.
- They predict competency in all speaking, learning, and social situations.
- They are comfortable with the listener and believe that both their message and speech breaks will be accepted.
- They are tolerant and accepting of their own speech disruptions.
- They feel in control of themselves and their environment.

What Teachers Can Do

Teachers can help improve fluency by reducing environmental demands and strengthening a student’s capacity as a communicator in the following ways:
- Become the student’s advocate. Pay attention to changes in attitude, emotions, relationships, and speech, especially those that seem related to communication. Report these changes to the speech-language pathologist.
- Promote spontaneous, proactive communication. Encourage volunteering. Analyze communication demands in the classroom and reduce or eliminate them when reasonable to do so. Be aware that many students who stutter find direct
questions asked in a large group to be very stressful. Avoid predictable speaking routines that can cause anticipatory anxiety, such as round robin reading and question answering.

- Listen attentively. Pay attention to what the student says, not how it is said. Find ways to reassure the student that you are interested in the message. If the student is experiencing substantial difficulty, say that you have plenty of time to listen. (If you don’t have plenty of time, say you will make time later—and remember to do so!)

- Create an unhurried environment for communication. Avoid interruptions, finishing statements, competition for speaking time, and direct advice to slow down or relax. Slow the interactions, not the student. Pausing before responding is an effective and natural way to create an unhurried environment.

- Inhibit your visible physical reactions to stuttering. Maintain normal gaze and facial expression. The more you are able to emotionally neutralize your reactions to stuttering, the more effective you will be.

- Prevent negative reactions from other students. Enlist the district counselor and the speech-language pathologist to help resolve teasing and negative comments. Do not draw attention to speech disruptions in a group. It is fine to discuss the disruption with older children in private. Let them know you are accepting and understanding and ask how you can help.

- Be willing to temporarily modify oral assignments to reduce the communicative pressure. Some assignments may be beyond a student’s capacities and will only result in increased stuttering.

- Be encouraging and accepting of all attempts to communicate. Fluency is often linked to the quality of the teacher-student relationship.

Adjusting General Classroom Demands for Speaking

- When it becomes necessary to call on a student directly, do so as soon as possible to avoid the buildup of anticipation that often leads to speech disruptions. Make sure that your comments are positive and your questions are open-ended. Accept short answers and check for more inferential thinking in private conferences. Answering questions in class can be very stressful for students who stutter.

- Negotiate with older students to modify speaking assignments. Allow them to give their presentations to you in private or in a small group of familiar, accepting partners. Assure them in advance that you will give them positive, constructive feedback. Allow them to record their presentations at home and play the recording for you. Provide time for multiple rehearsals and/or reading. Some students who have had sufficient practice may experience more fluency.