

Eli's Rehab Report

Trends: Stop Bullying Behavior With These Strategies

SLPs can turn the school setting into a safe zone for children who stutter.

Ask any speech-language pathologist (SLP) working in a school setting and you'll get the same answer: A child's stutter is still poorly understood by educators and a prime target for bullies.

Why: Communication is central to everything we do and "especially every way in which we interact with others," points out **J. Scott Yaruss, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, BRSFD**, associate professor of Communication Science and Disorders at the **University of Pittsburgh** and co-director of **Stuttering Center of Western Pennsylvania**.

And when it comes to stuttering, bullying actually exacerbates the problem. "When a child who stutters is being picked on, it makes him feel worse" and that can dramatically increase the stuttering -- calling even more attention to the problem, Yaruss says.

Good news: SLPs have a "unique advantage" when it comes to spotting or uncovering bullying because they usually work with children in small group settings. These intimate groups allow children to feel more comfortable opening up about teasing or other experiences they're having as a result of a communication disorder like stuttering, says **Nina Reeves, M.S. CCC-SLP BRS-FD**, with **Stuttering Therapy Services and Seminars** in McKinney, Texas.

SLPs -- and other therapy professionals working in a school setting -- can make a huge impact in decreasing bullying and increasing educators' awareness, Yaruss asserts. Here's how to get started:

Use Books To Bring Up The Topic

Those small group settings are the perfect launching pad for discussions about bullying in general, Reeves says. You can create entire sessions around the topic by choosing books that address bullying or in which the main character is bullied.

Do this: Start by reading a chapter that addresses bullying, then ask specific questions like, "Have you ever felt this way?" or "Have you ever known someone who acted like this?" Students may feel more comfortable talking about what they've seen happen to other people before they offer up their own personal experiences.

And don't think the person doing the bullying can't benefit from this type of interaction, Yaruss says. "The bully needs help in his own right," as studies have shown that children who bully often do so for reasons that can -- and should -- be resolved.

Find it: Yaruss and Reeves both contributed to a booklet published by the **National Stuttering Association** focused on bullying and stuttering. The appendix to the booklet lists many resources, including books whose main characters stutter. Access the booklet at www.westutter.org/whoWeHelp/Book-Bullying-and-Teasing2.htm.

Create A Culture Of Tolerance

Bullying has taken center stage recently -- pushing more and more schools to create "zero tolerance" policies. Your support can go a long way toward turning this administrative-level policy into one that all students embrace and maintain.

Do this: Present workshops to educators and parents about how to spot and handle teasing about communication disorders, Reeves recommends. Provide strategies for disciplining and educating students who do the bullying, and for protecting those being bullied.

But don't stop there. "We can also help children with their siblings and peers by presenting to classrooms," Reeves says. Enlist children who stutter in these presentations. Ask them to talk about stuttering and how it has affected them.

Giving the student body this type of information can go a long way toward defusing potential bullying situations. "The more we present communication disorders in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner, the less likely bullies are to find allies among the 'bystanders' -- the other kids in the class who typically go along with the bully because they are afraid of being picked on in their own right," Yaruss says.

And these educational opportunities will decrease the likelihood that educators or other students make comments that -- even when unintentional -- can also be hurtful, Yaruss points out.

Take Advantage Of All Your Resources

SLPs have a vast collection of resources and information at their disposal for creating a safe and healthy learning environment for all students.

For instance, several professional groups offer materials you can download for free to help plan those classroom in-services, including:

- The National Stuttering Association offers a pamphlet called "Classroom Presentations Can Help Children Educate Others About Stuttering" (www.WeStutter.org/whoWeHelp/Brochure-Class-presentations.htm). There's also the booklet on bullying and other helpful materials.
- The **Stuttering Foundation of America** offers a booklet on protecting children at recess (www.stutteringhelp.org/Portals/English/book0034.pdf).
- The **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association** offers a slew of presentations that are full of tips and strategies (<http://search.asha.org/default.aspx?q=bullying>).

But you should also consider educators and parents as top resources, Reeves says. Ask educators to work with you on disseminating information in a way that children will be most likely to listen and learn. Warn educators and parents when you see situations or environments becoming ripe for bullies.

Technology has improved, too. You can easily reach out to colleagues, administrators, and parents through newsletters, emails, or other technologies. These types of communication open the door for a close working relationship, and show those around you that you are an expert in this area.

By keeping everyone in the loop, parents will feel that their input is valuable, educators will feel more comfortable coming to you with issues, and you'll have the best weapon for eliminating bullying -- a team of adults working together to make schools safe for everyone.