

For Children Who Stutter

Youth Day is a part of treatment

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On a sunny Saturday in Tampa, FL, 23 children who stutter and their families watched a skit about stuttering and then split up into a series of workshops for school-age children, teens and parents. The day culminated in some structured-and unstructured-play outdoors. This Youth Day, sponsored by the National Stuttering Association (NSA) and the University of South Florida (USF), was lots of fun for the children but also was an important part of their treatment.

Speech-language pathologists play a multifaceted role. They must treat, counsel, and educate. In the area of fluency disorders, each component is critically important. The sum of these parts is often what dictates outcome.

Selection of an effective, evidence-based treatment is only the first step. Just as important are counseling and education, which can open opportunities for children who stutter to develop at two levels. When speech-language pathologists and parents understand factors that contribute to the maintenance of stuttering, such as genetics, temperament and home environment, they can set realistic expectations for prognosis and create opportunities for the child to establish fluent speech. Secondly, understanding that they are not alone helps children who stutter adjust socially, since stuttering does not miraculously disappear-even with the most effective treatment strategies. Network support and camaraderie among parents of children who stutter might help them cope, too.

Therefore, the speech-language pathologist's role in treating children who stutter involves knowing about and using evidence-based practice techniques, understanding and educating parents about mechanisms that maintain stuttering, and sometimes bringing together children who stutter and their parents. That's where support activities like NSA Youth Days are an important component of treatment.

At the January event adult members of the NSA Tampa Chapter wrote and performed a skit called "The Incredible Stutter," which used the Incredible Hulk as an analogy to convey the frustration children feel when they stutter. In the skit a superhero used his stuttering as a special, positive gift. Other characters included a fluent speaker who wanted to learn how to stutter so he could become a "cool stuttering superhero," too, and a wise man who trained superheroes to use their stuttering powers in a positive way.

USF undergraduate volunteers from the National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association assisted professionals in facilitating morning workshops for parents, children and teens. Nina Reardon-Reeves, MS, CCC-SLP, BRS-FD, assisted by Lisa Murphy, counseled parents in a workshop where they could share their feelings and experiences and get answers to their questions about stuttering. Cathy Castellano, MS, CCC-SLP, was assisted by Lauren Papke and Mary Beth McAfee in leading a large group of school-age children through structured self-help activities, which culminated in some unstructured fun on the playground. Undergraduates Hannah Harold and Kati Friedman assisted adult members of the NSA Tampa Chapter in leading a teen discussion group.

After lunch Alexis Maxfield, MA, CCC-SLP, of Hope Preparatory Academy, in Tampa, presented a workshop on what the hummingbird can teach children and parents about coping with bullying and teasing. Finally, Matt Provenzano, a member of NSA, read from a manuscript about his experience as a person who stutters, and a panel of adults who stutter from the NSA Tampa Chapter answered questions from the audience. Though many of the children and parents were local, some came from as far away as Ohio and Connecticut.

Speech-language pathologists and parents saw results of the workshop immediately. Recounting a middle school student's experience, Maxfield said, "When I met Thymesia a week before the workshop, she appeared shy, spoke only briefly, and hardly made eye contact with me. At the workshop I noticed her opening up, interacting with others-even complete strangers-and having fun. The following Monday Thymesia told her teacher and classmates all about the Saturday workshop and how cool it was. She also told her teacher and me that she would like to give a class presentation about her stuttering. Since the workshop, Thymesia appears to have a new-found confidence. Recently, I was somewhat surprised and impressed when I heard the principal announce her name before she recited the pledge over the intercom for all the school's staff and students to hear."

NSA member Stephanie Coppen traveled from Connecticut to attend the workshop with her 8-year-old son Cameron. "Cam really

enjoys being around kids who stutter," she said. "He can relax, not worry about how he sounds, and just be himself. During the parent workshop, we began by going around the room introducing ourselves and talking a little bit about our kids and our experiences. Many of the parents in attendance had never been at an event like this before and used it as an opportunity to say and share things they never had the chance to or felt OK to before. By the time we got finished with introductions and sharing, it was time to break for lunch. It was very cathartic for most parents. People who thought they were alone realized they weren't."

NSA sponsors Youth Day programs around the country, usually in partnership with a university or school district. Often included is a continuing education workshop for speech-language pathologists.

Nathan Maxfield is an assistant professor at USF. James McClure is a director of the National Stuttering Association. Anyone interested in organizing or participating in a Youth Day should contact the NSA office at 800-WeStutter (800-937-8888) or info@WeStutter.org. For more information about NSA, visit www.WeStutter.org.

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