



## Parents' reactions to children's stuttering and style of coping with stress



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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* The aim of the research was to determine: (a) how parents react to their child's stuttering, (b) what stress coping strategies they utilise, as well as (c) whether stress coping style depends on parents' reaction to their child's stuttering.

*Methods:* The research involved 23 mothers and 23 fathers of children who stutter (CWS) at the age of three to six years old. The Reaction to Speech Disfluency Scale (RSDS), developed by the authors, was used in the research. To determine the parents' coping the Coping Inventory in Stressful Situations (CISS) by N.S. Endler and D.A. Parker was applied.

*Results:* The strongest reactions are observed on the cognitive level. Stronger cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions are observed in the mothers towards their disfluently speaking sons and in the fathers towards their daughters. Having analysed the profiles of coping styles, it can be noticed that the task-oriented coping is most frequently adapted by the fathers. The mothers most often use the avoidance-oriented coping. No relevant correlation was observed between the fathers' coping style and their reactions to the child's disfluent speech. As far as the mothers are concerned, it has been proved that an increase in behavioural reactions correlates with the avoidance-oriented coping.

*Conclusion:* The cognitive reactions of the parents' towards their child's stuttering were most frequent, while the emotional ones were the least frequent. Confronted with a stressful situation, the fathers most often adapt the task-oriented coping, whereas the mothers use the avoidance-oriented coping. Educational objectives: the reader will be able to (1) learn what the key reactions of parents to their children's stuttering are, (2) describe stuttering as a stress factor for the parents, (3) describe the factors which influence parents' reactions to their child's stuttering and their coping style.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Parents' reactions and stuttering in children

CWS' parents have been the objects of researchers' interest for about 50 years now. According to W. Johnson's theory, stuttering begins in the ears of the parents (listeners), and not in the mouth of the child (Johnson & Associates, 1959). And, although the notion has not been verified empirically, parents are still commonly regarded as responsible for stuttering in

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their child and thought to be strengthening it by such inappropriate reactions as correcting (Nippold & Rudzinski 1995; Tarkowski & Skorek, 2009).

Having reviewed the literature, one can conclude that the early onset of stuttering has not been proved to be related to any particular features or attitudes of the parents (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1995). The parents who were examined in their child's initial stage of stuttering were similar to the parents of fluent speakers with regard to speech pace (Yarus & Conture, 1995), response latency (Zebrowski, 1995), interruptions (Kelly & Conture, 1992), openness and willingness to cooperate with other children (Weiss & Zebrowski, 1992), and attitudes (Embrechts & Ebben, 2000).

However, there is evidence that chronic disfluency may influence the parents' reactions towards the child (Meyers & Freeman, 1985). Such parents displayed different speaking rate parameters (Dehqan, Bakhtiar, Panahi & Ashayeri, 2008; Kelly & Conture, 1992; Meyers & Freeman, 1985; Savelkoul, Zebrowski, Feldstein & Cole-Harding, 2007), more frequent interruptions (Meyers & Freeman, 1985) as well as higher anxiety level (Zenner, Ritterman, Bowen, & Gronhord, 1978) than the parents of the children who do not stutter (CWDS). The parents' behaviours and reactions change when faced with the child's disfluency. This has also been confirmed in the research by Kloth, Janssen, Kraaimaat, and Brutten (1998) and Kloth, Kraaimaat, Janssen, and Brutten (1999), who had monitored 93 children before they began to stutter. The behaviours of the mothers whose children began to stutter did differ from that of the mothers of children who spoke fluently. However, within four years the mothers whose children continued to stutter have changed their way of interacting with the child. They were more withdrawn and asked for clarification or repetition more often as they found it difficult to understand their child. Interestingly, disfluency decreased among the children whose mothers had not changed their interaction style. It can be concluded that the mothers of permanently or increasingly disfluent children intervened more often and exerted pressure on their child in a more open way. By reacting so, they convinced them that utterances should be quick and carefully pronounced, and speaking is difficult and mentally and physically effortful (Conture, 1982).

Therefore, it can be observed that while parents cannot control if and when stuttering begins, once the disorder has been diagnosed and is chronic, they feel more anxious and change their attitudes and form of interaction with the child. This suggests that the child's stuttering triggers particular reactions of the parents, which may increase the disfluency even more. There is a two-way relationship between the parents' reactions and the child's disfluency. Recent studies offer a deeper insight into the parents' reactions to the child's speech disfluency (Langevin, Packman & Onslow, 2010; Onslow & O'Brian, 2013; Plexico & Burrus, 2012; Lau, Beilby, Byrnes & Hennessey, 2012).

### 1.2. Types of parental reactions to their child's stuttering and their consequences

Langevin et al. (2010) used their own method, The Impact of Stuttering on Preschool Children and Parents (ISPP), to examine how stuttering influences the parents of the children aged from three to six years old. The most common emotional reactions included anxiety, insecurity, frustration, anger, sadness, disappointment and sense of guilt. On the behavioural level, parents most often waited patiently until the child finished their utterance and advised them to speak more calmly, slowly and to take a deep breath. Parents are anxious about the child's development and future social position. They finish their utterances less frequently, try to talk to them as often as they used to and do not avoid situations that provoke stuttering. Parents are aware that their reactions are not always ideal, and feel guilty whenever they occur. One of the parents mentioned that stuttering has a negative impact on their relationship with the child. The results of this survey prove that the situation of CWS' parents is complex and difficult.

Plexico and Burrus (2012) concluded that parents are not sure about the symptoms of stuttering they observe and they wonder if the child will be able to deal with the problem on their own. They do not know the reason why their child stutters, but hope they will grow out of it. Parents often lack knowledge, which can make them feel insecure, and take actions that are not beneficial for the child and only increase the problem. They instruct the child to speak more slowly and breathe, reduce time pressure, strengthen eye contact as well as reassure that they are being listened to. They struggle to adapt their behaviours in order to facilitate their child's speaking, and highlight the fact that parenting a CWS can be difficult and challenging. One needs to invest more time and effort in listening to the CWS, which has also been confirmed in the study by Lau et al. (2012). The parents perceive their children and their behaviours as difficult. Although no significant differences have been observed in the parents' rearing style, the children perceived them as less attached.

Recent studies point to the particular role that parents and their reactions play in the initial stage of CWS therapy. The Lidcombe Programme for children aged from two to five years old assumes that it is important to make parents modify their methods of communicating with the child and develop a fluency-friendly environment. Parents are encouraged to reduce both speech pace, number of questions and excessive intellectual stimulation, as well as eliminate time pressure from their conversations with the child. Also, they are advised to avoid discussing the problem of stuttering and commenting on the way their child speaks when they are present. Direct modelling of the child's manner of speaking consists primarily in praising for fluent speech and commenting on the child's stammers in a friendly way. Effectiveness of this procedure is scientifically proved as most CWS who participated in the Lidcombe Programme displayed either complete fluency or significant reduction of disfluency (Guitar et al., 2015; O'Brian et al., 2013; O'Brian, Smith, & Onslow, 2014).

### 1.3. Stuttering in children and stress

Differences in parents' reactions to stuttering may be influenced by both external and internal factors. Presumably, external factors are not related to the family and include economic conditions, level of health care, the stereotype of a PWS

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