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Self-perceived competence and social acceptance of young children who stutter: Initial findings

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The goals of this study were to determine whether young children who stutter (CWS) perceive their own competence and social acceptance differently than young children who do not stutter (CWNS), and to identify the predictors of perceived competence and social acceptance in young speakers.
Method: We administered the *Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children* (PSPCSA; Harter & Pike, 1984) to 13 CWS and 14 CWNS and examined group differences. We also collected information on the children's genders, temperaments, stuttering frequencies, language abilities, and phonological skills to identify which of these factors predicted PSPCSA scores.
Results: CWS, as a group, did not differ from CWNS in their perceived general competence or social acceptance. Gender predicted scores of perceived general competence, and stuttering frequency predicted perceived social acceptance. Temperament, language abilities, and phonological skills were not significant predictors of perceived competence or social acceptance in our sample.
Conclusions: While CWS did not significantly differ from CWNS in terms of perceived competence and social acceptance, when both talker groups were considered together, girls self-reported greater perceived competence than boys. Further, lower stuttering frequency was associated with greater perceived social acceptance. These preliminary findings provide motivation for further empirical study of the psychosocial components of childhood stuttering.
Learning outcomes: Readers will be able to describe the constructs of perceived competence and social acceptance in young children, and whether early stuttering plays a role in the development of these constructs.

1. Introduction

Our self-perceptions largely rely on the evaluations and attitudes of people who are significant to us. By way of a "social looking glass," we create a sense of ourselves based on how others perceive us (Cooley, 1902). This identity development is inextricably linked to one's success in communication, which may be affected by stuttering (Daniels & Gabel, 2004). Stuttering is a remarkably complex phenomenon that has broadly been understood to be of multifactorial and dynamic onset and development. One component of this multidimensional understanding is the psychosocial involvement of stuttering.

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Our present understanding of the psychosocial correlates of early stuttering falls short of a complete picture—both in factors that contribute to stuttering's onset and development, and those that develop from experience with stuttering. Particularly, we do not yet understand the developing sense of self in young children who stutter (CWS). How do CWS perceive themselves in domains outside those directly related to communication? To address this gap, we examined two early-developing constructs of self-concept known as perceived general competence and perceived social acceptance in four- and five-year olds who stutter.

Empirical work in the field of stuttering has yet to address such broad constructs of the self in young children near the onset of stuttering. We are informed by the literature on young children's awareness of stuttering (Ambrose & Yairi, 1994; Boey et al., 2009; Ezrati-Vinacour, Platzky, & Yairi, 2001), their development of negative communicative attitudes as a result of stuttering (Vanryckeghem, Brutten, & Hernandez, 2005), and their temperaments which account for individual differences in their reactivity and regulation (review in Jones, Choi, Conture, & Walden, 2014). Together, this empirical base illuminates potential connections between perceived competence, perceived social acceptance, and stuttering. We believe that one potential and likely link is that stuttering may set some children up for difficulties with communication and subsequent listener reactions. These early experiences with challenging social interactions, paired with high emotional reactivity and/or low emotional regulation, could prompt young CWS to negatively view their abilities to meet the global demands of their environment.

Young children's limited metacognitive skills inhibit their ability to assess their overall self-concept as a whole, singular construct (Harter, 2003, 1990). In response to this challenge, researchers have developed means of assessing early building blocks of self-concept in young children via domain-specific perceived competencies, such as in physical, cognitive, and social domains. A frequently used assessment tool is the *Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children* (PSPCSA; Harter & Pike, 1984). This scale allows us to measure how young children judge their mastery of skills necessary to meet the demands of their environment in specific domains (Klein & Magill-Evans, 1998).

The skills that children learn during childhood, from riding a bicycle to developing speech fluency, involve consistent and constant practice at both overt and subconscious levels. As toddlers mature, they redirect their dependence on their caregivers towards greater independence in self-regulating their attention, emotion, and behaviors (Nelson et al., 2009). This increased self-regulation promotes skill mastery. The quality of self-regulation, and the inherent reactivity that precedes it, is not uniform across children. Troves of empirical evidence point to individual differences that prime children to seek out different experiences and to uniquely make meaning of those experiences. These individual differences are largely attributed to children's temperaments—their unique proclivities in attentional, emotional, and motor reactivity and regulation which make them active agents in their own environments (Rothbart, 2011). Thus, temperament acts a filter through which children's experiences with skill practice and subsequent mastery become individualized. As a result of their increasing skill development, they gain a sense of their competence in the world—a view that is relatively stable over time and contributes to their emotional, social, and academic development (Verschueren, Buyck, & Marcoen, 2001).

Given children's objective level of skill mastery, their early self-perceptions tend to be unrealistically positive and idealistic, all-or-none (i.e., one is either good at doing things or not), and directly linked to observable behaviors that the child demonstrates (Coplan, Findlay, & Nelson, 2004; Nelson et al., 2009). In most cases, these overly simplistic perspectives are helpful and adaptive in early childhood. Having a heightened sense of self at this critical stage of development can motivate young children to achieve greater levels of mastery and growth in a variety of skill areas (Harter, 1990), and may also serve as a protective buffer between negative life events and mental health (McQuade et al., 2014; Tram & Cole, 2000).

Although it is developmentally appropriate for young children to have an unrealistically positive sense of their own competence, not all children conform to this trend. Some children may perceive their competence realistically or negatively beginning as early as four years of age (Coplan et al., 2004). For these children, their realistic or negative self-perceptions tend to be correlated with a variety of adverse social and behavioral outcomes. For instance, they may demonstrate more non-social behaviors (e.g., reticence, solitary-passive withdrawal, solitary-active behavior; Nelson et al., 2009) and internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, loneliness; Coplan et al., 2004) than children who perceive their competence positively, and are at risk for being excluded by their peers and demonstrating poorer academic achievement (Klaver, Palo, & DiLalla, 2014; Miserandino, 1996; Phillips, 1984). These consequences can impede a child's goal setting, achievement, and fulfillment in life (Hotulainen, Lappaleinen, Ruoho, & Savolainen, 2010).

Studies of typically developing children have revealed constitutional and domain-specific factors that contribute to their perceptions of their own competencies (Jambunathan & Hurlbut, 2000). The constitutional factors that we examined in the present study were gender and temperament. Gender differences in competencies have been accounted for by variations in neural wiring between the sexes (Shaywitz et al., 1995), distinct preferences in activities that lead to differential mastery of those activities (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006; Early et al., 2010), and possibly gender-stereotyped socialization (Wigfield et al., 1997). Temperament is another constitutional trait that drives individuals to interact differentially and uniquely with their environment. In childhood, temperament is active in developing attentional capabilities and thus motivation, and this motivation is what promotes skill mastery and competence (Rothbart & Hwang, 2005). Children with high self-regulatory abilities tend to have high-quality social interactions, resilience when faced with adversity, and high academic achievement (Eisenberg et al., 1997; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rubin, Coplan, Fox, & Calkins, 1995). Importantly, extant research on the temperament characteristics of CWS have identified that CWS tend to have greater negative affect, differences in attentional processes, and lower adaptability than typically fluent peers (review in Jones et al., 2014). Given that high self-regulatory abilities are associated with high achievement and competence, and that CWS, as a group, tend to