



# Attitudes toward stuttering of nonstuttering preschool and kindergarten children: A comparison using a standard instrument prototype



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study investigated attitudes of nonstuttering preschool and kindergarten children toward peers who stutter in order to identify differences by age groups and better understand the genesis of stuttering attitudes. The study also examined the use of a new stuttering attitudes instrument designed for use with young children.

**Method:** The newly developed *Public Opinion Survey on Human Attributes–Stuttering/Child* was verbally administered to 27 preschool and 24 kindergarten children who do not stutter in the mid-Atlantic region of the USA.

**Results:** Overall, preschoolers held more negative stuttering attitudes than kindergarteners, but results were not uniformly in that direction. In both groups, the attribute of stuttering was viewed more negatively than individuals who stutter. Children viewed the potential of peers who stutter as quite positive, whereas their knowledge about and experience with stuttering were generally limited and some of their beliefs quite negative.

**Conclusions:** Negative or uninformed stuttering attitudes among nonstuttering children begin as early as the preschool years. This study provides empirical evidence for the need to educate young children about the nature of stuttering and how to respond appropriately to peers who stutter.

**Educational objectives:** Readers should be able to: (a) describe attitudinal differences between kindergarteners and preschoolers toward peers who stutter; (b) describe the parameters of the *POSHA-S/Child*; (c) describe the nature of stuttering attitudes in young children relative to their beliefs and self reactions; and (d) describe the implications and future direction of stuttering attitude research in young children.

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## 1. Background and rationale

Over the past several decades, there has been a gradual but definite shift in recognizing stuttering not only as a physiological disorder, but also as social disability (Yaruss & Quesal, 2004). An expansive and growing literature base has sought to examine the experiences of people who stutter from the perspective of their social milieu, i.e., attitudes toward stut-

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tering of those with whom they interact or *the public*. In the ubiquitous stuttering literature, the term public attitudes<sup>1</sup> refer to the inaccurate, insensitive, or otherwise unhelpful beliefs, reactions, perceptions, opinions, values, and related constructs that have been documented in various populations including: educators (Abdalla & St. Louis, 2012; Crowe & Walton, 1981; Ruscello, Lass, Schmitt, & Pannbacker, 1994), speech-language pathologists (Cooper & Cooper, 1996; Lass, Ruscello, Pannbacker, Schmitt, & Everly-Myers, 1989), college students (Betz, Blood, & Blood, 2008; Dorsey & Guenther, 2000; Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Gabel, Roseman, & Daniels, in press; St. Louis & Lass, 1981), employers (Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004; Gabel, Hughes, & Daniels, 2008; Hurst & Cooper, 1983a; Hurst & Cooper, 1983b; Irani, Gabel, Hughes, Swartz, & Palasik, 2009), and family units (Özdemir, St. Louis, & Topbaş, 2011b). This body of work has consistently confirmed the existence of a negative “stuttering stereotype” (Woods & Williams, 1976), which pervades cultures and populations worldwide.

To date, a majority of the research evaluating public attitudes toward stuttering has been conducted in adults, wherein the etiology of such attitudes remains uncertain due to myriad environmental influences from years of diverse experiences. However, there is growing evidence that awareness of and negative attitudes toward stuttering may begin at a young age (Clark, Conture, Frankel, & Walden, 2012; Langevin, in press; Vanryckeghem, Brutten, & Hernandez, 2005). In order to more clearly elucidate the origin and development of negative stuttering attitudes, young children are of particular interest in continued epidemiological investigations.

### 1.1. Children’s awareness of stuttering and speech difficulty

At an early age, children who stutter and children who do not stutter begin to construct self-perceptions relative to their speaking ability. An expansive literature has consistently shown that the communication attitudes of children who stutter are significantly worse than children who do not stutter in evaluating their own speaking difficulties, with little apparent effect of children’s sex or culture (e.g., Bajaj, Hodson, & Westby, 2005; Bernardini, Vanryckeghem, Brutten, Coceo, & Zmarich, 2009; De Nil & Brutten, 1991; Gačnik & Vanryckeghem, 2014; Kawai, Healey, Nagasawa, & Vanryckeghem, 2012; Vanryckeghem & Brutten, 1997). In fact, such attitudinal differences have been shown to occur in children as early as the preschool years (Clark et al., 2012; Vanryckeghem et al., 2005). Using the *Communication Attitude Test for Preschool and Kindergarten Children who Stutter (KiddyCAT)* (Vanryckeghem & Brutten, 2007), Clark et al. (2012) showed that stuttering children reported greater speech difficulty when compared to nonstuttering children. In addition, there is substantial evidence that young children who do and do not stutter also demonstrate the ability to discriminate between fluent and stuttered speech in others (Ambrose & Yairi, 1994; Ezrati-Vinacour, Platzky, & Yairi, 2001; Griffin & Leahy, 2007). Ambrose and Yairi (1994) followed 20, 2–6 year-old children who stuttered and 20 age-matched children who did not over the course of two years. In three different visits, children watched a video depicting a fluent puppet and stuttering puppet and were asked to select which puppet talked the way they do. Only few preschool children who stuttered demonstrated awareness of the similarity between the puppet’s stuttering and their own stuttered speech, but by 5–6 years of age, their ability to identify a similar-speaking puppet became consistent. Ezrati-Vinacour et al. (2001) conducted a similar study in children ages 3–7. Results indicated that 25% of typically fluent 3 year-olds were able to differentiate stuttered and fluent speech, and this skill was consistent in most children by 5 years of age and older. These findings parallel psychological and developmental research that has shown children’s awareness of differences in themselves and others emerge during the preschool years and continue to increase with age (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Hazzard, 1983; Rochat, 2003). However, it remains unclear if a child’s ability to discriminate differences in human attributes (i.e., stuttering) is a product of factors such as one’s maturation or one’s experiences.

### 1.2. Children’s attitudes toward stuttering

Awareness of differences in others naturally gives way to the development of attitudes toward persons who possess those differences, involving beliefs about and reactions to various human attributes. McDonald and Messinger (2011) reviewed the literature on the development of empathy in young children and posited that both emotional and cognitive components undergo identifiable changes from shortly after birth to adulthood. While it is clear that young stuttering children may hold negative *self*-attitudes toward their own stuttering, we are interested in whether or not nonstuttering children hold similar perceptions toward them. As children become aware of differences, they begin to develop a belief system of attributes considered to be desirable and those that are not, and these contain both emotional and cognitive aspects. Psychologist Frances Aboud (1988) proposed a “social-cognitive developmental theory” to describe the interaction of children’s maturational development and their understanding of the world and those around them. According to her theory, emergence of prejudice in children is influenced by rapid changes in their cognition and development. As a result, prejudice does not develop in a linear fashion; rather, it emerges quickly between 4 to 6 years of age and begins to decline around age 7. Aboud’s social-cognitive theory of prejudice draws from the seminal cognitive development work of Piaget which posits children younger than age 7 have rigid classification systems and do not have the cognitive ability to think flexibility (Piaget & Cook, 1952). Therefore, they lack the capacity to classify persons according to multiple traits or attributes (Killen & Rutland,

<sup>1</sup> “Attitude” has been variously defined over the past decades. One well-known conceptualization was advanced by Rosenberg and Hovland (1960). It asserts that an attitude refers to the evaluation of an object or class of stimuli and has cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. We chose not to use those terms because stuttering itself is often conceptualized with the same three dimensions and, therefore, might cause confusion for readers.

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