



August 2020

Dear _____,

This letter is to inform you that a student of yours, _____, is a child who stutters who has previously attended a program with us at **Camp SAY**. We want to share some information with you about stuttering and ways that you can support children who stutter in the classroom and online learning.

What is stuttering?

Stuttering is a complex and often-misunderstood communication disorder that can cause interruptions in a person's speech. And what's more, children who stutter often have feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, or discomfort about their speech. About 1% of the world's population stutters—that's 70 million people!—but no two people who stutter are exactly the same.

Other important things to know about stuttering:

- ❖ **Stuttering is a hereditary, neurodevelopmental disorder.** It is not caused by anxiety, abuse, or anything the child/parent is doing wrong. However, stress and anxiety can exacerbate stuttering and make it harder for a child to communicate.
- ❖ **The surface features of stuttering** can include sound repetitions ("Let's ride in the c-c-c-car") and tense blocks ("Let's read a ---- book"). They may also include *secondary behaviors*, which are other body movements when a person is stuttering, like eye blinks, leg shaking, or tension in the face.
- ❖ **Stuttering is much more than what we can see and hear.** Stuttering can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment, and low self-esteem, as well as bullying/teasing by other students. Many children will go to great lengths to try to hide their stuttering, which can result in avoidance of things like speaking in class or introducing themselves. They may even pretend not to know the answer, or find an excuse to leave the room (by going to the bathroom, etc.) if it means they don't have to stutter in front of others.

How should I listen and talk with children who stutter?

People encountering stuttering for the first time may feel uncomfortable or unsure of how to respond. But for the child who stutters, **stuttering is a natural, normal occurrence** and should be treated that way. Other helpful tips:

- ❖ **Do not finish sentences or rush them to speak.** Time pressure can be a challenge for people who stutter, and often leads to increased tension and exacerbated stuttering.
- ❖ **Avoid telling the child to "slow down" or "relax."** Statements like this can also put unnecessary pressure on the speaker. Focus on *what* is being said, rather than *how* it is being said.
- ❖ **It is okay to say "I didn't understand what you just said, could you repeat it?"** Sometimes it can be hard to understand a person who is stuttering, but you should avoid pretending or guessing what they said. Instead, show that you care what is being said by listening again—even if it means they will stutter again.

Can stuttering be cured? And how does Camp SAY help?

Stuttering cannot be “cured” like a disease or illness. And there is no approved medication to treat stuttering.

SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that offers a variety of programs to support young people who stutter and their families. **Camp SAY** is a sleep away and virtual summer camp experience that brings kids who stutter together from around the country, with goals of strengthening confidence and communication skills. In addition to our Camp, SAY also offers **Speech Therapy** for 1-on-1 work to address underlying attitudes, emotions, and behaviors related to stuttering. Finally, we have an arts-based after school and weekend program called **Confident Voices** for kids during the school year.

What else can the teacher do?

- ❖ **Promote good communication and listening for all students.** You can help all members of the class learn to take turns talking and listening. This, in addition to addressing any bullying or teasing, will create a safe space for the benefit of all students.
- ❖ **Be especially mindful during online meetings.** Using Zoom or other online platforms, it can be harder to tell when a child who stutters is experiencing a block, especially at the start of a sentence or if it seems as though they are finished. Consider the following:
 - Leave a little extra time to be sure they are done after speaking.
 - Check in occasionally to be sure they have a chance to contribute.
 - Develop a visual cue that they are ready to speak, such as raising their hand or using a chat feature.
- ❖ **Talk to the child and their parents about other accommodations that might help.** Students who stutter may have personal preferences about being called on (versus being allowed to raise their hand first to answer questions), or they may appreciate being given an opportunity to give presentations in front of just the teacher or a smaller group. Others may not want any accommodations—it is important to respect the student’s needs while still expecting the same quality of work from them.
- ❖ **Consider a student-led presentation to the class about stuttering.** For some children who stutter, it can make a big difference to share with their classmates about stuttering. Depending on your relationship with the child, it might mean a lot to give them the option. And we’ve seen a change in classmates’ attitudes when they better understand stuttering. Please let me know if I can help you in approaching your student about this idea or in creating the presentation. Other resources can be found at www.say.org and www.stutteringhelp.org/teachers.

Thank you for considering this information, and for your collaboration. Please let us know how else we can support you and your students, and let us know if you have additional questions or concerns! We are available by phone at 212-414-9696, or you can reach us by email at info@say.org.

Sincerely,

The SAY Team
(SAY.org)