

# Middle school students' perceptions of a peer who stutters<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Little is known about how middle school students perceive a similar-aged peer who stutters. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of stuttering frequency, Likert statement type (affective, behavioral, cognitive), and the gender of the listener on middle school students' perceptions of a peer who stutters. Sixty-four middle school students (10–14 years) individually viewed a video sample of a teen telling a joke at one of four stuttering frequencies (<1%, 5%, 10%, 14%). After the students viewed one of the video samples, they were asked to rate 11 Likert statements that reflected their affective, behavioral, and cognitive perceptions of a peer who stuttered. The results revealed an interaction between stuttering frequency and Likert statement type. Ratings of behavioral statements (speech production characteristics) were significantly more positive for the sample containing <1% stuttering than 10% and 14% stuttering. Ratings for cognitive statements (thought and beliefs) were significantly more positive for the sample containing <1% stuttering than 10% and 14% stuttering. The stuttering frequency of the peer did not significantly influence how students rated affective statements (feelings and emotions). It was also found that male and female middle school students did not significantly differ in their perceptions of a male peer who stutters. Clinical implications are discussed relative to peer teasing, friendship, listener comfort, and social acceptance within a middle school setting for a student who stutters. Future research directions are also discussed.

**Educational objectives:** The reader will be able to: (1) summarize how middle school students perceive stuttering; (2) explain how the frequency of stuttering influences middle school students' perceptions of a peer who stutters; and (3) provide clinical implications of the data from this study.

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## 1. Introduction

Social interactions and affiliations with peers are important in middle school and critical to adolescent development (Parker & Asher, 1993). Among young adolescents, peers are a significant source of positive experiences and they are happiest when talking with their peers (Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, & Prescott, 1977). In early adolescence, a strong

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sense of belonging to peer groups emerges and there is considerable importance placed on group conformity while balancing an acceptable level for individual differences within the group (Newman & Newman, 1997). An acceptable level for individual differences within the group is often determined by the peer group. Consequently, its members are susceptible to the peer pressure and possible alienation if an individual difference does not meet the group norm, particularly for students in the 7th and 8th grades (Urberg, Shyu, & Liang, 1990). Although research has shown that students with communication impairments are more likely rejected by peers (e.g., Rice, Sell, & Hadley, 1991), little research has examined how middle school students perceive a similar aged peer who stutters. This is particularly relevant to the present study as nonstuttering children 8–13 years of age indicated their own feelings and behaviors toward stuttering would be strongly influenced by their nonstuttering peers (Langevin & Hagler, 2004).

Although many studies have been conducted on how listeners' perceive adults who stutter (e.g., Collins & Blood, 1990; Manning, Burlison, & Thaxton, 1999; Panico, Healey, Brouwer, & Susca, 2005; Susca & Healey, 2001; Woods & Williams, 1976), less is known about how listeners perceive children and adolescents who stutter. Two early studies that examined children's perceptions of stuttering were conducted by Giolas and Williams (1958) and Culatta and Sloan (1977). In both studies students in kindergarten to fourth grade indicated preference for fluent speech over stuttered speech. Additionally, Giolas and Williams found many of the second graders were able to define the disfluent speech as stuttering, whereas the kindergartners were more vague in their reasons for stating disapproval. In contrast, Culatta and Sloan found none of the first or second graders used the word stuttering to label disfluent speech.

More recently, Ezrati-Vinacour, Platzky, and Yairi (2001) examined the awareness of stuttering among children 3–7 years of age using a video sample with a fluent and disfluent puppet. Similar to the findings of Culatta and Sloan (1977), Ezrati-Vinacour et al. (2001) found that few of the 6- and 7-year-old children could label disfluent speech as stuttering. However, children as young as 3 years of age were able to identify and discriminate between the fluent and stuttered speech. In addition, Ezrati-Vinacour et al. found the children showed a preference toward choosing the fluent puppet as a friend rather than the disfluent puppet.

In a similar study, Griffin and Leahy (2007) asked young children (3–5 years) to view a videotaped speech sample of a puppet telling a story with moderate stuttering and a puppet telling a story with fluent speech. The researchers found the children perceived the puppet with moderate stuttering more negatively than the puppet with fluent speech. In contrast to findings of Ezrati-Vinacour et al. (2001), the children did not show a preference toward the puppet they would choose as a friend. In addition, the authors found the personality traits of the puppet with moderate stuttering were not perceived any more negatively than the fluent puppet. Therefore, the young children attributed more negative ratings to intelligence rather than personality attributes of the puppet with moderate stuttering.

General speech production awareness among children has also been examined. Bajaj, Hodson, and Westby (2005) conducted a qualitative study about the conceptions that kindergarten, first, and second grade students (5.10–8.10 years) had about the attributes of a "good talker" and a "bad talker." In response to structured interview questions, the typically fluent students most readily identified pragmatically based behaviors (e.g., "They tell lies") rather than form-based behaviors (e.g., "They speak loud."). In addition, their form-based responses were diverse. Only 17% of their form-based responses related to stuttering-like behaviors. Therefore, these data may suggest a limited awareness or concern about stuttering among typically fluent young school-aged children.

Among older children, Franck, Jackson, Pimentel, and Greenwood (2003) asked fourth and fifth graders (9–11 years) to rate two videotaped speech samples of an adult—one containing 3.2% stuttered syllables and the other containing 14% stuttered syllables. No secondary coping behaviors (e.g., eye closure, head movement) were associated with the speech samples. The elementary school-age students were asked to rate the speaker using adjective pairs related to various personality (e.g., outgoing–shy) and intelligence (e.g., intelligent–stupid) traits of the speaker. Franck et al. (2003) discovered that students in both grades provided significantly more negative ratings for the speech sample that contained 14% stuttering than 3.2% stuttering. In contrast to Griffin and Leahy (2007), the authors found that fourth and fifth grade students did not rate the personality and intelligence traits of the speaker differently. Thus, it appears that children's perception of the personality traits of an adult who stutters begins to change between 5 and 9 years of age.

Hartford and Leahy (2007) compared children's (6–13 years) perceptions of a fluent adult speaker to the same adult producing simulated stuttering. The simulated stuttering was subjectively judged by speech-language pathology students to range from moderate to very severe stuttering. After hearing an audio recording of both speakers tell a short story, the primary students responded to 14 questions that contained positive and negative attributes about the speakers (e.g., Who do you think would be a quiet person?). Their findings revealed that the children assigned greater negative

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