

Speaking Up About Fear

February 8, 2016

Sweaty palms, dry mouth and a rapid heart rate. You may have felt these before speaking in public, talking to an intimidating boss, meeting new people at parties or socialising. Most of us experience fear in social or performance situations when we believe we may be judged by others. For about 22 – 60% of adults who stutter, this fear is intense enough to be classified as social anxiety disorder. Some individuals with social anxiety disorder learn to avoid social situations for temporary relief from anxiety, however this results in less chances to build and practise social skills and experience positive interactions. In adults, social anxiety disorder is linked to poor self-esteem, distress, lower education, reduced occupational achievements, unemployment, and the development of psychological issues such as depression. The good news is that treatments exist to guide adults through managing their speaking-related fears.

So what do we know about anxiety in children who stutter? Box Hill Speech Pathology Clinic was recently involved in a study by Macquarie University into the ‘Social and Emotional Experiences of School-Age Children Who Stutter’. Families of 225 children (7-12 years), including 75 children who stutter and 150 who do not, completed an online survey, with both children and parents submitting responses. The research found that anxiety is much higher in children who stutter than non-stuttering children.

- **Any anxiety disorder:** 32% of children who stutter demonstrated anxiety disorders compared to 10.67% of non-stuttering children.
- **Social anxiety disorder:** 24% of children who stutter had social anxiety disorder compared to 4.67% of non-stuttering peers, indicating that this disorder may develop at a far younger age than previously thought. The number of children with the disorder in this study is significantly higher than rates reported in large community surveys.
- **Generalised anxiety disorder:** 33% of children who stutter met some of the criteria for generalised anxiety disorder, compared to 2% of non-stuttering children.

What does this mean for clinicians and families? This research shows that it is vital to develop speech and psychological programs to target the unique speech-related fears of children who stutter.

Key Points

- About 22 – 60% of adults who stutter have social anxiety disorder.
- Individuals with social anxiety disorder may avoid social situations, leading to reduced opportunities to develop and practise social skills.
- Adults with social anxiety disorder may experience poor self-esteem, distress, reduced occupational achievements, and the development of other psychological issues.
- There are treatments for anxiety in adults who stutter.
- Anxiety is much higher in children who stutter than non-stuttering children.
- Social anxiety disorder rates are much higher in stuttering than non-stuttering children, and this disorder may develop at a far younger age than previously thought.
- Developing speech and psychological programs to target the unique speech-related fears of children who stutter is crucial.



Reference:

‘Social and Emotional Experiences of School-Age Children Who Stutter’ (2013 – 2015) by Dr Lisa Iverach and Professor Ron Rapee AM from the Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University.

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