

Dealing with Teasing

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In the January-February issue of **Reaching Out** Connie Dugan shared her “Teasing Inventory.” The subject of teasing is always important because it is so prevalent. In my 40 years of working with children, teens and adults who stutter I do not recall a single person who said that teasing never occurred. In the case of children, the teasing was usually directed toward the stuttering itself. For teens and adults, the target of the teasing may have been more subtle, more sarcastic, and aimed toward things in addition to the stuttering.

Yes, people can be teased because they stutter. We usually think of teasing as directed toward “negative qualities” such as being too heavy, too uncoordinated, or ascribed to such things wearing hearing aids, walking with a limp or wearing braces to straighten crooked teeth. Although less common, people can also be teased for “positive traits” such as being too smart (teacher’s pet) too popular (conceited) or too athletic (a glory hound.) I’d like to expand on the theme expressed by Connie Dugan by providing some ideas on how you might deal with being teased.

Teasing often begins because the people doing the teasing hope to get a reaction from the person being teased. Bullies are trying to “make their victim suffer” so the more you react, the more likely it is that the bully will continue to taunt and aggravate you. Once this happens, the people who are doing the teasing tend to continue with the teasing because of the reactions they get: after all, it wouldn’t be worth continuing the teasing if no reactions were being shown to it. I’m sure that most of you have been told to “ignore” the bully in hopes that the teasing will stop. Sometimes this works, but it’s hard to ignore a situation where you are being teased and bullied. You have probably also heard the old adage that “sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me.” Well, even though the names will not hurt you physically, they sure can hurt emotionally. These pieces of advice basically ask you to be passive and not react.

When you are teased, picked on, made fun of and bullied, it is really hard not to react. After all, you are probably angry and upset. But getting into a verbal argument or a physical shoving/fighting match will not help in the long run because it is not a socially acceptable way to respond, and if the bully is bigger and tougher than you, then you are the one who may be physically harmed.

There are ways that you can react that will be positive and socially acceptable. You need to work to find ways to react to the teasing and bullying that will signal the fact that you are okay with your stuttering. If bullies realize that you are okay with yourself, and with your stuttering, this will at least partially disarm them and take some of the air out of their sails.

I’ll bet people have told you that you need to develop a “tough skin” and not be so sensitive about stuttering. This is good advice, but easier said than done. I’ll bet people have told you that you need to have courage, and not be afraid of stuttering, and not be afraid of the negative reactions you sometimes get because of your stuttering. Instead of showing that you are upset and angry, try to develop some reactions that are more positive and show that you can deal with your stuttering. Show them that you do not need to be a victim of their bullying.

What follows are some quick examples of things you can say to a bully. In saying these things, it is important that you say them calmly and matter-of-factly. Say these things with a smile on your face. Try to convey a tone of voice that will show that you are not as bothered as the person wants you to be. Attempt to show the person that you are okay with your stuttering.

Here some examples of things you can say if people are giving you a hard time:

- If someone asks you if you have any hobbies and interests, you can answer by saying: “One of my hobbies is stuttering. I’ve been practicing, and am getting very good at it.”
- If someone asks you if you have stuttered all your life, you can answer by saying: “Not Yet.”
- If someone comments negatively on your stuttering, you might say: “Sure I stutter. What are you good at?”
- “Sure I stutter. May I teach you how to do it?”
- “Stuttering is ok, because what I say is worth repeating.”
- “Stuttering is ok, and I have permission to do it.”
- Try smiling and chuckling a little bit as you say, “you’d better watch out – I might be contagious.” :-)

Since I do not know you personally, it is hard to be specific about your own particular situations. Maybe your parents and speech clinician can help you develop some replies that are more appropriate for you. Then, you can work with them to practice these ways of responding.

In closing, let me leave you with this quotation from the former Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York City. This is a comment he made following the September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center.

“Courage is about the management of fear, not the absence of fear.”

Best wishes !! Strive to be courageous !!

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