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Assertiveness and responsiveness in the language of three-year-old children who stutter

The language use of children who stutter (CWS) has been an area of fairly new interest in speech-language pathology. Recently, a review of social language use suggested that CWS may differ in this area compared to peers who do not stutter (Weiss, 2004). One suggestion has been that CWS may have greater disfluency in producing certain types of speech acts. One way of categorizing a child's speech acts, proposed by Fey (1986), is by dividing them into those that assert new information (assertives) and those that respond to the speaker in some way (responsives). The purpose of the present study was to compare the fluency of CWS in producing assertive speech acts versus responsive speech acts. As part of a larger project, four CWS, each 2 to 3 years of age over the course of the study, were followed each month for 10 months, during which time 10, 100-utterance play-based language samples were obtained. For the present study, the utterances of the 40 samples (10 per child) were analyzed and coded as (a) fluent assertive, (b) stuttered assertive, (c) fluent responsive, or (d) stuttered responsive. Raw numbers and percentages were then tabulated within each category for each child. The results were that, consistent with the literature (Weiss & Zebrowski, 1992), for each of the four children, stuttered utterances were significantly more likely to be assertives than responsives. However, these results should be interpreted with caution, because children tended to produce substantially more assertives in general than responsives. Of importance, individual patterns of the children's assertiveness and responsiveness over time suggested that, while two of the children showed considerable fluctuation in the proportion of their assertives that were stuttered, two of the children showed a marked decrease in stuttering on assertive utterances over time.