

Dunwoody Crier Newspaper article

Dunwoody therapist practices what he preaches

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For The Crier

When the movie "The King's Speech" premieres in Atlanta this month, many in the audience will understand first-hand the challenges faced by the soon-to-be King George VI as he struggles to conquer his stuttering. At least, one movie-goer will understand both him and his eccentric speech therapist.

Speech-language pathologist Tim Mackesey, who lives and practices in Dunwoody, was a childhood stutterer who decided to develop speech therapies that actually work. As in the movie, in which the court-approved therapies did not help the future king, counter-intuitive direct intervention works best.

"People used to think that calling attention to a child's stuttering would make it worse. That's just not true," said Mackesey.

Stutterers are all around us. In fact, five million Americans stutter. Many hide their symptoms by being quiet and withdrawn. Those who stutter openly are often victims of ridicule and bullying.

Stutterers are best treated in early childhood. Those who get treated later or get no treatment at all have the added burden of developing potentially debilitating fears that complicate the condition.

Mackesey, who stuttered for 25 years, knows how cruel people can be.

"Look at Porky Pig and (actor/singer) Mel Tillis," he said. "In movies, stuttering is the punch line. In 'Smokey and the Bandit' and other films, directors would cut, reshoot and edit Tillis to get his stuttering into a scene. It's fair game to mock stutterers."

Mackesey, who has a master's degree in speech pathology, has been treating stutterers for 18 years. He is one of only a few speech-language pathologists in the country with a full caseload of stutterers.

"I went to grad school for two reasons," he said, "to help myself and then to help others."

A quarter of Mackesey's patients are adults, with the remainder being children and adolescents. Since children are most effectively treated before the age of 7, he developed a pre-school program he calls F.A.S.T. Fluency. He claims a 90-plus percent success rate in the 12 years he has been using it.

The key to F.A.S.T. Fluency is direct, immediate intervention by parents. Mackesey teaches parents to intervene when their children stutter and help them learn to self-correct their stuttering in any situation.

Mackesey says his approach disproves the long-standing medical myth that calling attention to stuttering will only make it worse.

"After all," he said, "children teach themselves to walk. Why not to stop stuttering?"

Mackesey compares stuttering to being stuck. "You can't get unstuck unless you use direct action," he said.

Even though the public schools are required by law to offer therapy to stutterers, direct action is more likely to come from the parents than the schools because many stutterers simply fall through the cracks.

Children learn a variety of ways to hide their affliction, one of which is avoiding attention of any kind. Teachers, who often don't see the behind-the-scenes bullying, are so happy to have students who stay out of trouble and maintain good grades they often don't know these children have a problem.

"They learn early on how to hide their stuttering. I've met children as young as three who were already word-changing," Mackesey said, "but pre-schoolers' solutions always make things worse."

The good news is that, as in the movie, the right therapy can work - at any age. Mackesey has also treated attorneys, professors, sales people, CEOs and other adults whose careers depend on public speaking.

For information, readers can go to www.stuttering-specialist.com or contact Mackesey directly at 770-399-5455 or fluency@bellsouth.net.

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