

THE STUTTERING BOY

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HAVE you ever seen a stuttering girl? A girl, that is, who chronically stutters? If so, you have observed a phenomenon which is rare, although stuttering boys are common enough. However badly coordinated or hysterical may be the actions of girls and young women, the disturbances seldom take the form of the annoying repetition of the same syllable which is properly called stuttering. That other form of stammering in which there is a deadlocking of the vocal apparatus so that no sound is uttered for a painfully long period, with practically no other abnormal behavior, is also relatively infrequent in females. Stuttering, and to a less extent stammering in general, is peculiarly a masculine derangement.

It is obvious that there must be some connection between this sex-limitation of stuttering, and the cause or causes of the trouble. The source of stuttering must be sought in some peculiarity of the language function of the male which is not found in the language function of the female, and not, as is popularly supposed, in mere shock, fright or 'nervousness.' I have heard detailed stories concerning various stutterers, dating the beginnings of their speech difficulty from a severe fright in one case, from the shock of an accident in another case, from an attack of typhoid which left a weakened system in another, and soon. Even if we were not forced to discount these histories heavily, we would be obliged to conclude that they are only contributing causes; agencies which by weakening the resistance gave the real cause a chance to get in its deadly work.

The theory of stuttering which suggests itself most

readily is based on the supposition that in the animal kingdom generally, the voice of the male is more definitely a sex-function than is the voice of the female. The voice is one means of wooing; and we might expect that in the sex-excitability of the adolescent period this function, so intimately associated with the primary sex-functions, would be especially liable to derangement. This may indeed be so; although there is little evidence that in the human animal the male's voice is more sex-expressive than is the female's, or that the adolescent boy is more excitable sexually than is the girl. In any case, this theory does not explain why the speech derangement takes the general form of stammering or the specific form of stuttering, and hence the causes it proposes are at the most but contributing or predisposing influences.

The actual determining cause of stammering for a large proportion of cases is clearly indicated by the data obtainable from the cases themselves. Two facts stand out from this data: first, that the stammering dates (where the dating can be definitely made), from the time when the boy first went to school, or began first to associate with a number of other boys; and second, that in many cases (not in all), the stammerer has especial difficulty with words beginning with one of a small group of sounds—the sounds with which certain obscene words much favored by small boys also begin. Bearing these two facts in mind, it is usually possible to find that at the time when the stammering commenced to develop, the boy became familiar with a certain list of terms which he employed with satisfaction among his juvenile friends, but which it would never, never do to let his mother, father or sisters hear. These terms are usually obscene, but may be in part profane expressions, or merely words like 'damn' or 'hell.'

The boy who has a rugged constitution may keep his two linguistic personalities distinct and apparently suffer no harm. The boy who has no great scruple (or fear) about letting out his gutter-vocabulary, occasionally at least, in the hearing of his family, never, so far as my observations go, becomes a stammerer. But the boy who is 'carefully brought up,' if he is handicapped by a weak constitution, or predisposed by hereditary tendency to erratic muscular activity (such as may be expressed by continual twitches of

the face, 'nervous' movements of the hands or feet, etc.) is very apt to become a stutterer, or a stammerer of the deadlock type.

The enunciation of a word is a complicated process, requiring the cooperation of a large number of muscles in a very intricate combination; which is bound together by what we call in psychological language, *association*. Two words which begin with the same sound—as for example, *sheep* and *shingle*, have the same initial group of movements associated with different succeeding movements in the two cases. Hence there is always a possibility that the initial sound which ought in a given case to be followed by the remainder of the one word, may, through the going astray of the association be followed by the remainder of the wrong word; a type of 'slip of the tongue' which occurs occasionally to every one. The boy in constant fear lest one of his obscene terms may slip out in the wrong company, and having experienced this dangerous tendency of words to go astray, soon comes to hesitate over every word which begins in the same way as do these dangerous words; and as the hesitation becomes a more and more fixed and noticeable habit, it extends to other types of words also.

This danger of a slip would not be present, of course, if the forbidden words were not associated, as wholes, with the other words in the boy's habitual forms of speech. The root of the whole trouble is that the boy has formed the habit of using these terms, not merely in discussing matters of sex (which of course he would not ordinarily discuss with his family) but also in talking of more commonplace topics.

The peculiar feature of stuttering: the repetition of the syllable many times, is a result of the usual method of checking the utterance of a word; the nervous discharge which should go to the forming of the remainder of the word must go somewhere, and the easiest disposal, in the beginning of the trouble, is to let it discharge into the same act which has already occurred, namely, the production of the initial sound of the word. In later stages of the disease, the nervous energy may be discharged to the muscles of the face in such a way as to give the tetanic contractions of the nonstuttering stammerer. Usually, however, the stuttering

rapidly becomes a permanent habit, although complicated by the other type of stammering.

Simplistic as this explanation sounds, a very large proportion of the cases of stammering are directly traceable to it. In most cases the boy's parents have not merely established conditions excellent for the habit-formation, but have more directly contributed by administering drastic punishment (such as washing out the mouth with soap), or still more deadly moral horror, when a telltale slip has occurred.

Other causes of stammering, of course, occur: but they are generically like the more frequent causes just described. The fear of giving incriminating information of some sort other than that of mere vocabulary; an undue sensitiveness or worry about certain topics not discussed in mixed company; or similar mental conflicts; are at the bottom of certain cases, which usually are not of the typical stuttering type.

The reason girls do not stutter is fairly evident. They are not subjected to the same conditions as are boys and do not develop the same fear of revealing a *tabu* vocabulary, although they may have incriminating matter to conceal, and may develop accordingly a hesitating type of stammering. Small girls undoubtedly do discuss with their school-mates matters of which their purblind guardians presume them to be quite ignorant; but they do not embody the vulgar terms of these topics in their conversation about other matters, as boys do, and hence they have little fear of words popping out of their mouths at inauspicious times.

You have probably heard angry girls of tender age reel off strings of smutty words worthy of the best efforts of any boy; but these girls are practically always from homes in which an occasional (or frequent) outburst of such diction would have no very disastrous consequences. 'Proper' little girls do not talk that way among themselves—'proper' little boys do, and it is the 'proper' little boys who become stutterers. There are, however, some stuttering girls, and they have undoubtedly been subjected to precisely the same social conditions which produce stuttering boys.

What has been said above applies to the cases of chronic

stammering. Everyone stammers and stutters—more or less, just as everyone shows from time to time a variety of inaccuracies of movements of other types. Imitation plays a definite role in some cases. Occasionally a family is found in which nearly all the members stutter; inheriting in common a ‘nervous’ disposition, the form of expression it takes in one member may determine the form in the others. The imitative factor is often shown in a ludicrous way when a person who normally does not stutter is talking to a chronic stutterer. In such cases, especially when there is emotional excitement, it may be difficult for the auditor to determine which of the two is the worst stutterer.

The cure of stuttering is a difficult matter. In most cases the original cause has ceased to operate, and the stuttering has become merely a fixed and well-nigh unbreakable habit before expert assistance is sought. But the prevention, which is a more important matter, would be relatively simple, if it did not require a certain degree of intelligence on the part of the parents; a requirement which few of us parents meet in regard to our own children. The essential thing is the avoidance of the fear-stimulus. If your small boy, who probably can use some lurid language among the fellows, knows that (as one small stutterer expressed it to me), you would “have a fit” if you found him out, you are taking an unjustifiable risk, however small, of making a stutterer of him, and a great deal larger risk, of course, of making him immoral in some other way. There are far safer and more effective ways of discouraging the taste for bad language than by taking the I-would-be-shocked or the it-would-break-my-heart attitude. I would give this advice to any father; if your small boy commences to stutter, find out what obscene and otherwise objectionable terms the boy is apt to be using, and then make an opportunity to talk to him about these terms, telling him (if you can truly) that you did use these or equivalent words yourself, and have stopped it. At any rate, make it plain to him in one way or another that your attitude towards him, if he should break out with such language, would be no more contemptuous, crushing or sniffing than if he should break out with measles.