

# Early Intervention in Stuttering from the Parents' Perspective: Findings from International Comparative Surveys

Wczesna interwencja w jękananiu w opinii rodziców – wyniki międzynarodowych sondażowych badań porównawczych

## Introduction:

"Early intervention for stuttering—which may range from parent counseling and indirect treatment to direct instruction—can be a major factor in preventing a life-long problem." (Guitar & Conture, (2007, s. 5). It is important that professionals, other than speech-language pathologists/therapists (SLPs/SLTs), are able to identify stuttering. When parents notice their child is stuttering, they often ask teachers and physicians about their child's speech. It is the SLPs/SLTs responsibility to ensure these professionals are educated about the topic of stuttering.

Physicians and (pre)school teachers who understand stuttering are more likely to steer parents in the right direction by providing them with correct information and making the appropriate referral in a timely manner (Yairi & Carrico, 1992). An SLP/SLT can provide parents with valuable information, including strategies to make immediate changes within the home environment (Guitar, 2014). These strategies can increase positive feelings and emotions associated with stuttering. Understanding stuttering in terms of etiology and general facts can increase parents' awareness and allow them to be advocates for their child. In addition, the speech-language pathologist can provide information about support groups that can provide emotional support and give parents the opportunity to talk about their successes and struggles with other parents who are overcoming the same obstacles (Ambrose, 2006; Schneider, 2013; Zebrowski, 1997). Parents benefit from understanding the reason(s) their child is stuttering and take comfort in learning ways they can maintain their child's positive feelings to guide learning and social growth. Therefore, it is important both the family and the child gain access to the appropriate professional help.



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## Methodology:

The aim of this study was manifold. Firstly, it aimed to evaluate and compare parents' opinions about the quality of intervention in stuttering in four countries – Austria, Poland, Slovakia and the United States. Secondly, it was designed to draw attention to specialists (SLPs/SLTs), educators, general practitioners and the general public towards early intervention in stuttering. Thirdly, it aimed to increase knowledge of stuttering among the general public – especially among parents.

### Participants

The survey was conducted in four countries:

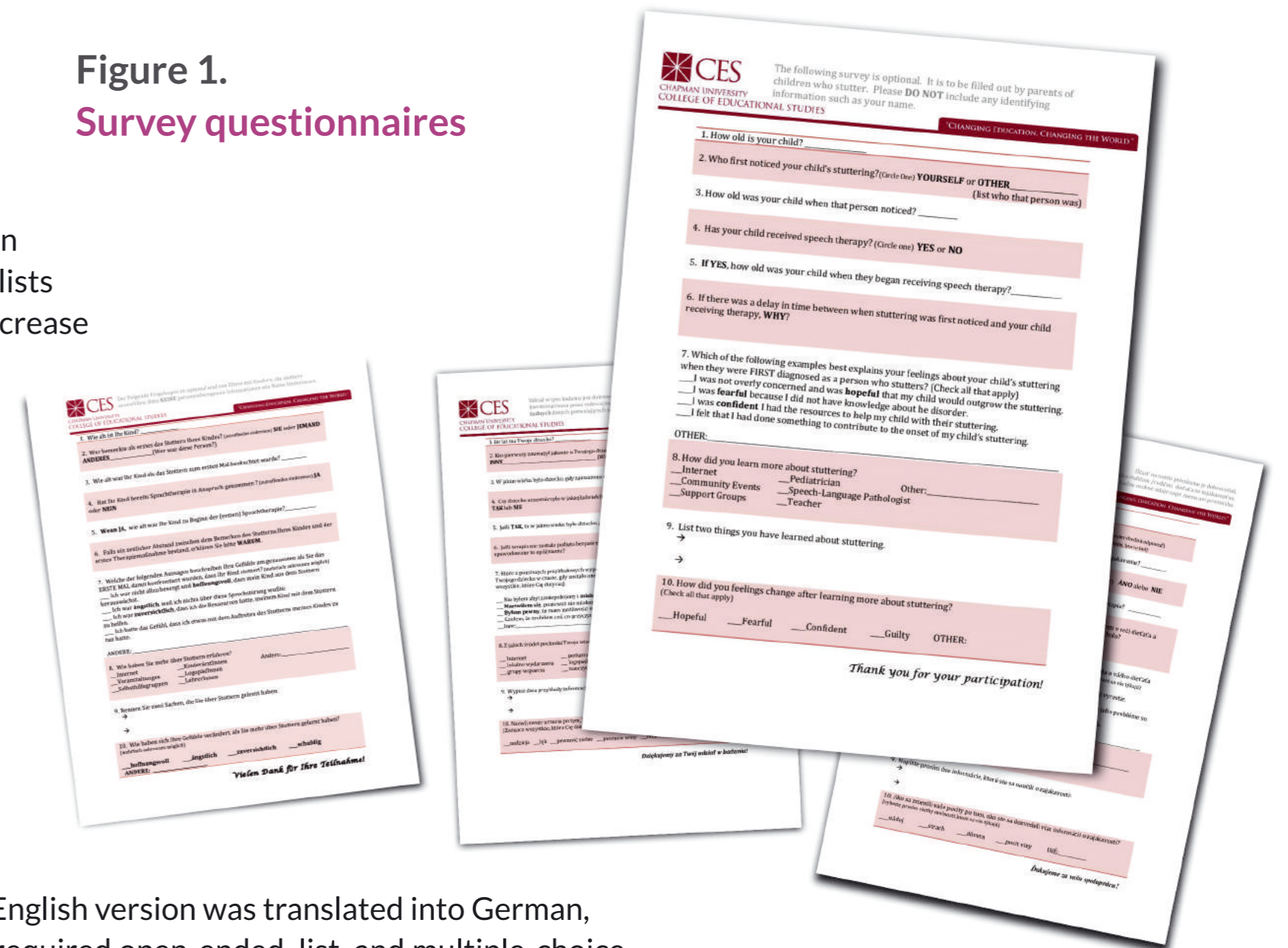
- Austria – 50 respondents
- Poland – 146 respondents
- Slovakia – 53 respondents
- United States – 64 respondents

The respondents were approached through local SLPs/SLTs, stuttering self-help groups and at stuttering support conferences.

### Survey Questionnaire

A pencil-and-paper survey comprised of 10 questions was developed by the American team for the purpose of this study. The original English version was translated into German, Polish and Slovak (in Austria an internet-based version was created and used alongside the pencil-and-paper version). The questions required open-ended, list, and multiple-choice responses. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Survey questions were developed to provide a descriptive analysis of the population of parents of children who stutter and evaluate their response to general questions about their child's stuttering. The questions were distributed among the following areas of investigation: age of onset, identifier, gap in receiving services, and feelings and emotions. The demographic questions solicited information regarding the child's age and diagnosis. Questions were asked to determine which other professionals that SLPs/SLTs must educate in order to ensure that children who stutter are receiving timely and proper treatment.

Figure 1. Survey questionnaires



## Results:

As it was expected the onset of stuttering most commonly occurs at the preschool age.

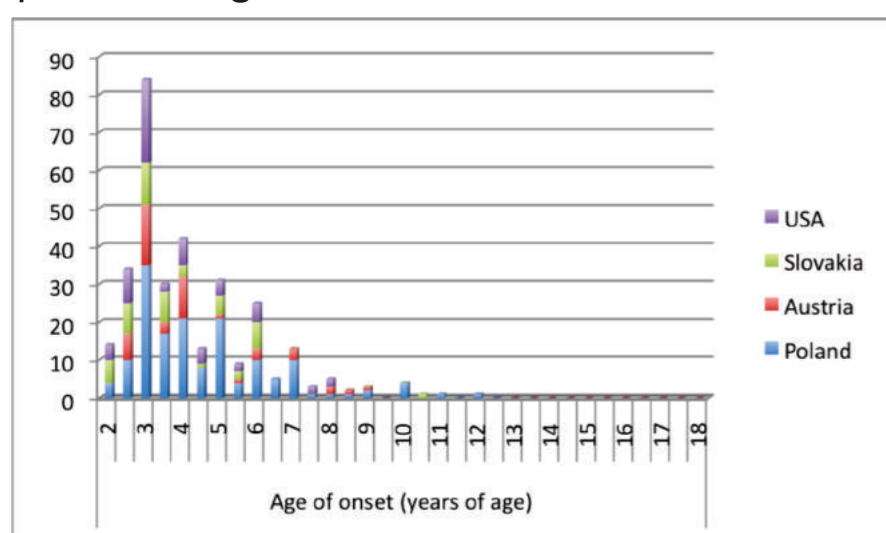


Figure 2. Age of onset

The findings were similar for all countries – the parents in most cases were the first to notice the symptoms of stuttering.

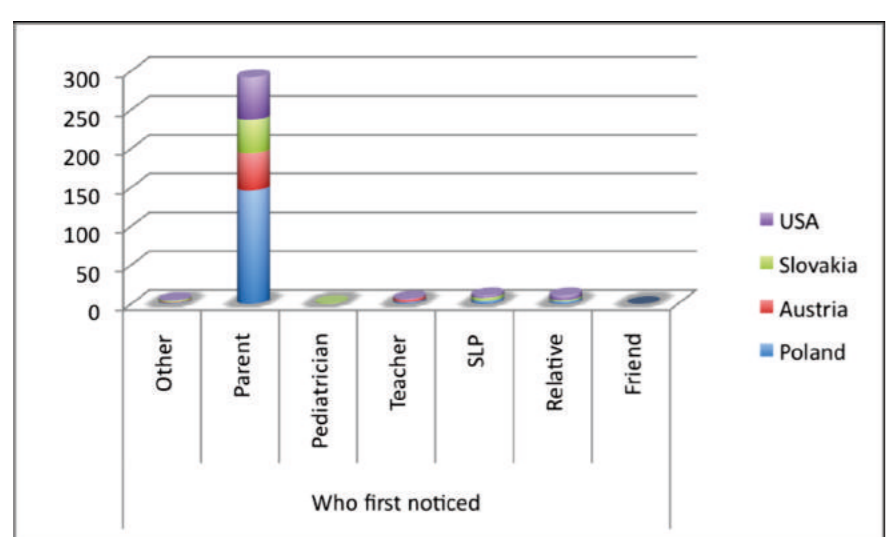


Figure 3. Who first noticed

Most children in this study had received speech therapy which would be expected from the study design. There might be some children in these countries who did not have access to therapy.

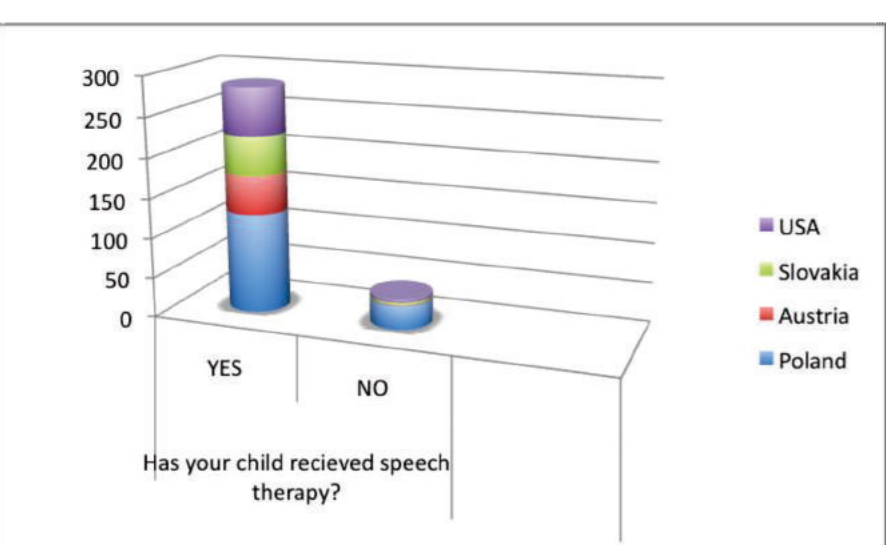


Figure 4. Receiving of speech therapy

The rather high responses «no» in Poland might be explained by the fact that not all questionnaires were gained with an SLPs/SLTs support (in some cases self-help groups for people who stutter assisted in identifying parents of children who stutter).

The most common reasons for intervention delay in early stuttering:

- the parents thought that the child would *grow out of stuttering*,
- the parents were told by a pediatrician, teacher or SLP/SLT that the child would *grow out of stuttering*,
- looking for a specialist/ on waiting list for services.

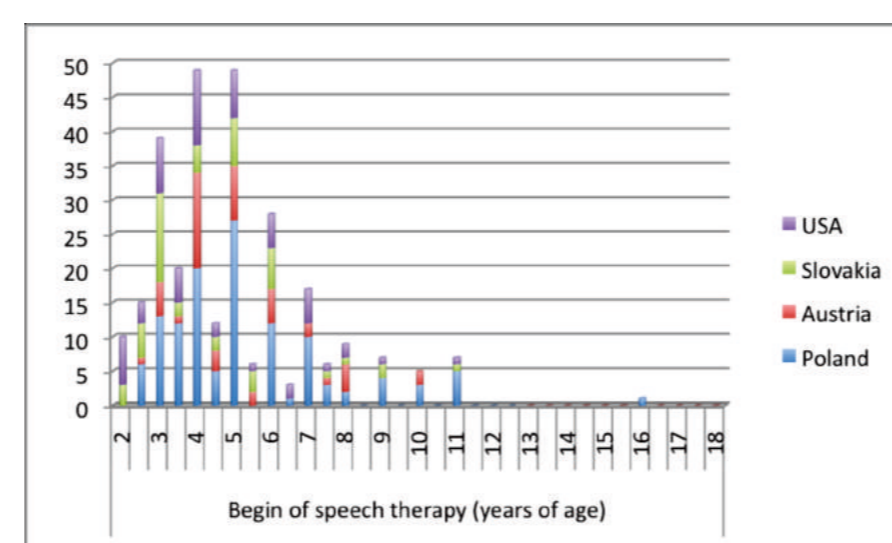


Figure 5. Begin of speech therapy

The median age for the United States and Slovakia was 4 years and for Austria and Poland the median age was 5 years. The difference might have to do with different attitudes towards early intervention. Example: the United States compared to German speaking countries like Austria (see e.g. Natke, 2010).

### Changes in feelings of:

- *hopefulness* increased in all countries except Austria (where it's the same),
- *fearfulness* decreased in all countries,
- *confidence* decreased in Poland and Slovakia, increased in Austria and United States,
- *guilt* decreased in all countries.

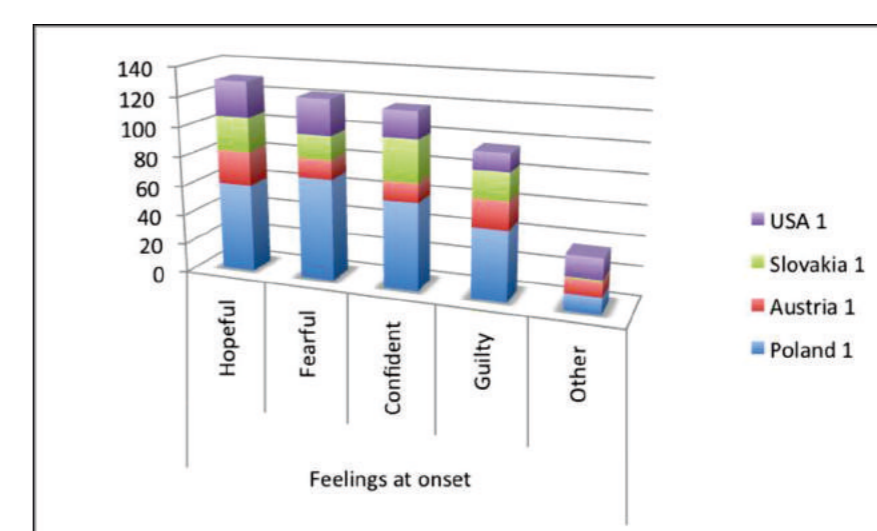
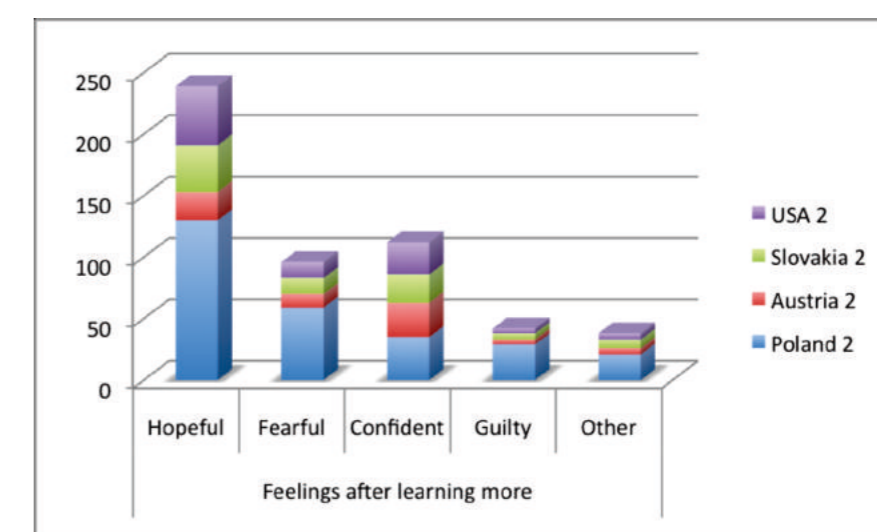


Figure 6. Changes in feelings



The findings showed that parents mainly receive information from SLPs/SLTs and the Internet.

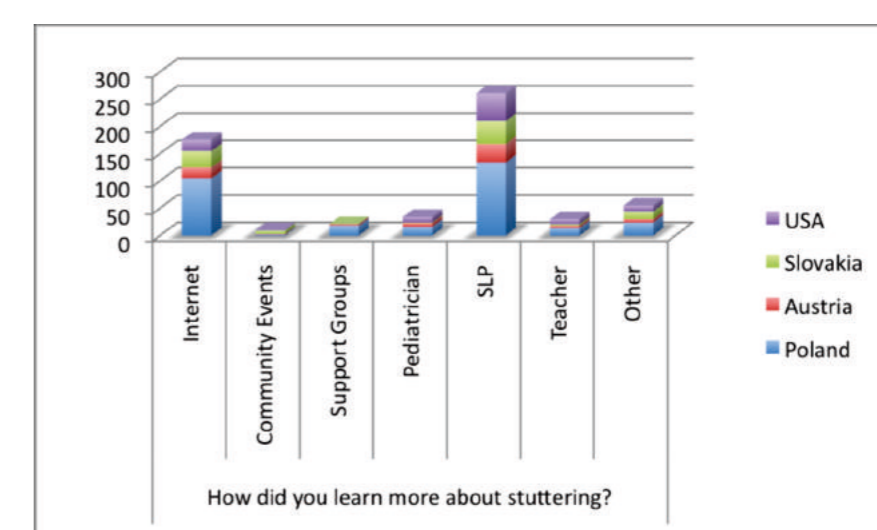


Figure 7. Sources of knowledge of stuttering

## Discussion:

The decision whether a child should or should not receive intervention for stuttering should be made by a person with thorough knowledge about stuttering. It is not acceptable that intervention is delayed because of misinformed pediatricians, teachers or other professionals. It is the responsibility of SLPs/SLTs to make sure that medical or other professionals who interact with young children are correctly informed about the fact that although many children may outgrow their stutter, this is not always the case.

The Internet is an important resource since it is the main avenue for parents seeking intervention information and education about stuttering. We need to make sure that correct information about stuttering is easily accessible to parents on this platform, as they are often the first to notice the stuttering. As a result of this survey, further questions that need to be investigated would be who the parents are telling after they identify their children as stuttering and what education and training pediatricians are receiving about stuttering. Now that we know who is noticing, targeted education towards parents and medical professionals who work with young children can make the difference in timely stuttering intervention.

## Practical Implications:

In order to broaden the knowledge and level of familiarity with early intervention in stuttering among parents, medical professionals, caretakers, and the general public; a multilingual leaflet and poster were prepared and disseminated.



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