

Educators offer tips on overcoming stage fright

by Sonya Embry

Middle school student Paris Williams can speak before a crowd without a qualm. She is skilled at improvisation and uses humor when all else fails.

"If I were to mess up on my lines, I'd just say something to laugh it off," she says.

Her cousin and classmate Nia Byrd usually worries herself sick until the moment she hits the stage. "I'm fearful," she admits. "It's just something that's always been there."

But after years of participating in speech events, school plays, dance teams and other activities at the Peoria, Ill., fine arts school, she's learned to manage her fear and force herself into a different persona when she appears before large groups.

FREED SPEECH - Experts offer advice on how to overcome a fear of speaking in public. CNS
Illustration by Michael Anthony Noel.

"I've learned that you're going to make mistakes and that's OK. I try to remind myself - I'm human," says Nia, a determined young woman who describes herself as somewhat of a perfectionist.

Don't let fear control you, she says. Use it as a motivator to work harder and improve. "Failing is when you don't try," says Nia, who aspires to be an actress someday, with a back-up career in psychiatry.

Fear of speaking or performing in front of others is a nearly universal anxiety. Even accomplished speakers admit they occasionally get butterflies before taking the mike. But there are a variety of ways parents and teachers can help children feel more comfortable in front of an audience.

START EARLY

Martie Ogborn of the Professional Communicators Toastmasters Club in Springfield, Ill., says she believes the home environment in which children are raised plays a role in how comfortable they are speaking before others.

"When that environment nurtures the sharing of ideas, it's much more comfortable for people to get up and share their opinions," she says.

She suggests parents start with the basics - sit down and read a book with their children, then discuss the book and open up a dialogue of opinions so children feel the freedom to contribute their ideas.

Sten-Erik Armitage of the Prairieland Toastmasters Club encourages parents to ask their youngsters to memorize short poems or Bible verses that they can recite to the parents, then gradually increase the size of the audience to include grandparents or other relatives.

It's a technique he's used with his own daughters. The goal, he says, is to make a child's initial speaking experiences positive through praise and encouragement.

"You don't want to beat them down with suggestions and criticisms," he says. "Even if it was horrible, find something positive to say. The more they do it, the better they'll get."

An all-too-familiar unpleasant experience for young students, Armitage says, is being asked to read a passage aloud before the class, then fumbling a difficult word and getting laughed at by peers. Still, he says kids should get in the habit of speaking before their class at an early age.

Retired educator Jim Fogelmark, who taught and coached speech at the middle school level for 33 years agrees. The earliest form of this, of course, is show and tell.

"Tell a story. What's your favorite nursery rhyme? Instead of always writing about what you did on summer vacation, stand at your desk and tell the class," Fogelmark says.

PRACTICE, DON'T MEMORIZE

Fogelmark and Armitage, who also taught speech for a time after college, both advise beginning speakers to choose topics they know well enough to keep notes to a minimum.

Armitage says the speech should be written out in full so a student can fully develop his or her thoughts, but it should not be memorized or written word-for-word on note cards. This helps students avoid getting stuck when they forget a line or lose their place.

"You don't want to memorize it because that does not deliver well. You can tell when something is being read," Armitage says. "If you memorize ideas but not words, you never lose your place."

Once a speech is prepared, the educators suggest students work one on one with a classmate or small group to practice.

"I think it's important they start out working with people they're familiar with," Fogelmark says, adding it's important to practice in front of others - rather than alone - so the speaker hears suggestions for improvement. Videotaping and reviewing your own speech is another tool to use.

Chatea Green, a Peoria, Ill., literature teacher, says practicing in small groups gives students some supportive faces to make eye contact with in the larger audience, rather than focusing on others who might make them feel vulnerable.

"I always tell the kids, no matter how you feel, never let them see it on your face," Green says.

Her students also work on being good, courteous audience members. "We're working on constructive criticism - how to give it and how to handle it," she says. "I can always tell when something negative is going to come out of (a student's) mouth. I tell them, 'You can think it, but don't say it.' "

JUST KEEP GOING

Nia Byrd, the middle school student, advises students to keep moving forward with a speech or routine, even if they mess up what they had planned. This may require that you improvise, which is OK, she says, because few, if any, in the audience will know what you're supposed to be saying.

The same goes for practice sessions, Armitage says. Keep moving through a speech rather than starting over whenever mistakes are made. That way, you don't end up practicing the introduction 97 times and the entire speech just once, he says.

A positive attitude also helps.

"One of the worst things people can do when giving a speech is apologize before they start it," Fogelmark says. "Never apologize for it before you give it because the audience is going to automatically turn you off from the start. If you're not very good, they'll know soon enough.

"I always made sure they had a podium, just to block the view a little bit, to hang onto - sort of a security blanket," he adds.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Much the same way students can lean on classmates as they prepare for speeches, Toastmasters clubs are designed to provide a supportive environment for adults who want to improve their communication skills.

"You're with a small group of people ... whom you get to know very well," Armitage says. "It's a small, encouraging environment; a constructive environment."

Of course, Peoria Downtowners Toastmasters member Larry Shipman, who's been with the organization for 40 years and helped form several local clubs, recalls a time when the atmosphere was more harsh. For one of his first Toastmaster speeches in 1966, nails were thrown into a metal bucket to draw attention each time he used an audible pause such as "um."

Today, rather than criticize, mentors advise fellow members on the best ways to prepare a speech or presentation and offer positive suggestions as to what a speaker might have done differently.

That way, Shipman says, instead of fears running through a speaker's mind during a presentation, he or she has some practical solutions or techniques to focus upon.

"In my 40 years of training and looking for solutions to these problems, I can say it takes practice, but it also takes some discipline," he says. "You overcome fears with a big capital 'c' word - confidence."

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