

GENERAL MANAGEMENT OF SPEECH ANXIETY IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

This handout provides general suggestions for supporting children who find talking difficult with certain people, or in certain situations. Such children may be described as selectively mute (SM) or, in milder cases, reluctant speakers.

Ways to approach the child:

- ★ Accept that the child wants to speak, despite their silence, and do not resort to bribery, flattery, challenge, threats or gentle persuasion in an effort to elicit speech. This will only increase the child's anxiety. Try to provide *incentives* to speak, rather than pressure, in the form of either natural incentives (seeing other children gain from speaking, for example), or positive reinforcement (responding to any communicative attempt or social contact with warmth and approval).
- ★ Ensure that any comments about lack of speech in front of the child are encouraging, and stress that the difficulty will not last forever. Acknowledge the child's difficulty, but in doing so, be careful to reassure and build confidence, rather than collude with and add to their anxiety. For examples of phrasing you might use, see below.

BE POSITIVE!!

You may be tempted to say:

You won't have to do anything that's too difficult.

I know it's really hard for you, you poor thing.

Don't worry if you find it difficult, you don't have to join in if you don't want to.

You can do things differently to the other children.

It must be horrid being the only one with this problem.

You don't have to go to the picnic.

It's better to say:

You will not have to do anything until you feel completely comfortable.

I know it's horrid, but it won't always be like this.

It's very hard for you at the moment, so you have to miss out sometimes. But don't worry; we'll all help you until you can join in the fun too.

It will gradually get easier and easier, until one day you'll feel brave enough to do the same things as the other children.

Lots of children find it hard to talk, even though they really want to. They get over it in the same way, as you will.

I need a special helper. I'd like you to help me get things ready and look after your sister while the others are playing.



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Here's a treat to help cheer you up.

We're going to visit someone today. I'm sure they're really nice. You will try hard to talk, won't you?

Of course the other children don't think you're weird.

I know you really wanted to talk to your teacher today – but you mustn't worry, it's really not that important.

Shhh! It's rude to talk about David like that.

Leave David alone, he can't help it.

Sarah's very shy and not feeling brave enough to read in assembly.

Here are some sweets to thank you for being such a help and trying so hard.

We're going to visit someone today who can help. They won't ask you to do anything you feel unhappy about. It sounds like it will be fun.

Well, I suppose it must seem weird to them that you don't talk. But once they've heard your voice a few times they won't think it's weird at all.

I know you must be disappointed that you didn't talk to your teacher today, but there's a good reason why you didn't manage it. You'll be fine when everything's just right.

Of course David can talk – he talks beautifully to his family.

If you want to do something useful, why don't you try being as helpful as David?

Sarah needs time to get used to being here – that happens to lots of children. She's still an important person in the class and we've got another important job for her.

How unfamiliar people can help the SM child to relax

The following suggestions may be useful:

- ★ Create an atmosphere that is relaxed and friendly around the child.
- ★ Build rapport by doing things that the child enjoys, using favourite toys and activities.
- ★ Talk to the child, commenting on what is going on, since SM children are often excluded socially, avoided by adults and children alike. Language enrichment is also especially important if there is an additional language impairment.
- ★ Avoid direct questions, unless they require only a yes/no answer that can be given by a nod or a shake of the head, or the child can point to respond.
- ★ If you do inadvertently ask a question, either answer it yourself or quickly side-step with a comment such as 'Let's decide later'.
- ★ Make comments, such as 'I wonder ...', 'It looks as though ...', 'I expect ...', which may provoke a response but do not require one.
- ★ Avoid too much eye contact.
- ★ Give the child the impression that you understand and accept them, and are not overly concerned about the mutism.

- ★ Accept natural spontaneous gesture, acknowledging that speech is difficult for the child at the moment, but don't actively encourage this in case it becomes a difficult habit to break.

How the family can support the child in the community

Families of a child with selective mutism may have other family members who are shy, quiet, or not very socially skilled. In addition, life is more automated these days, doing away with personal communication. There may be room for modifying the child's experiences a little, to give better models of the importance of communication, and to encourage greater need for the SM child to speak out.

- ★ Show the child you enjoy social interaction, by talking to another parent at the school gate, or inviting a neighbour or friend round for coffee.
- ★ Help and encourage the child to make friends by inviting round a local child, not necessarily from school.
- ★ When children come round make it just for a short time at first and with plenty of support, possibly based round a particular activity you might all do together.
- ★ Use local shops, banks and post offices more, rather than supermarkets or automatic cash machines that do not require speech. Later the child can also be encouraged to talk outside the home, by popping in to the cake shop for example, and choosing a favourite bun for tea.

Dealing with comments from others

Teachers and parents find themselves having to deal with comments and questions from other children, staff and family members. Below are some typical comments and a few thoughts on handling them:

- ★ '*[N] can't speak*' '*Why doesn't [N] speak?*'
Play this down as soon as it starts. Give the impression that you are not concerned. Say in front of the child that children are often a bit shy. If necessary, explain that some children find it difficult to speak out when there are lots of people around, or when they are not at home or with their mum. Make it clear that the child can speak at home and with the family. Say that soon we hope [N] will feel comfortable speaking at school, and we are going to find ways of helping. Suggest it will be very nice when [N] is able to speak out in the class.
- ★ '*Have you lost your tongue?*' '*Are you going to speak to me today?*'
Every parent has to get used to what seem to be unhelpful and uninvited comments from certain relatives, known adults and members of the general public, on all manner of subjects. These comments directed at a child with selective mutism can seem particularly irritating or perhaps painful, as parents realise how self-conscious their child will feel. They arise for a number of reasons – quite often embarrassment, a genuine desire to be helpful, or out of ignorance. In some situations parents may do best to ignore the comment. In others it may be best to say [N] is rather shy; while sometimes with closer friends or family members some fuller discussion is needed, *out of earshot of the child*. After the incident, it can be very supportive for the child to hear some empathic comment from a parent – 'That was awkward for you when Mrs Z said that'. Ask the child how it felt, but rather than collude with the child, make reassuring comments that it will not always be like this; the child will soon be comfortable talking to her.

When other children speak for the child

This can be a tricky issue. Here are some broad guidelines:

- ★ Parents and teachers need to dissuade other children from swamping the SM child and jumping in when a (probably non-verbal) response from the child is wanted. Teachers are used to children answering out of turn, and the usual methods should be employed when this happens. At the same time it needs to be understood that other children are probably trying to help, and they sometimes have a useful role.
- ★ If the child can't answer the teacher, it can be helpful and a step forward if the SM child is encouraged to tell a friend what the picture they have drawn represents, and the friend can then tell the teacher. At times SM children have been able to read to a friend, but not to their teacher, and this has been deemed preferable to no reading. At other times one of the class may come up and say '[N] told me she wants a new book'. Encourage this if it is a step forward, but later you may need to explain that '[N] is practising using her voice a bit more, so she can tell me herself now'.

How to react when the child finally does speak

The first spoken words from an SM child are obviously a breakthrough, and at least a cause for inward rejoicing. However, a balance needs to be struck between obvious pleasure and an over-reaction which might overwhelm a self-conscious child.

- ★ At the time of the first spoken words, the adult should be pleased but matter-of-fact, not dwelling on the occurrence but continuing along similar lines to try to evoke similar responses. When the activity is finished a reward can be given in the form of a sticker, or whatever reward system is being used. If the child has spoken as part of a structured treatment programme, it is appropriate to give more overt praise at the end of the session and acknowledge a big step forward, sometimes in front of the parent or teacher.
- ★ In the classroom it is hard to stop an immediate shout '[N] spoke, Miss', and sometimes a spontaneous burst of applause. Watch the reaction of the child: some children may appear very proud, while others may be overwhelmed. If this is so, modify the response by saying 'There's no need to make a fuss – we always knew [N] could speak.'



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SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SPEECH ANXIETY IN SCHOOL

HANDOUT

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Supporting Children with Speech Anxiety in School

This handout provides suggestions for school-based staff supporting children who find talking difficult with certain people or in certain situations. Such children may be described as selectively mute (SM), or in milder cases, reluctant speakers.

Before starting school or nursery:

- ★ Check how well the child understands and speaks at home, including the extent to which they speak outside the home.
- ★ Check the child's speaking habits – that is the extent of speaking outside the home and with unfamiliar people.
- ★ Prior to the child joining the school it is very helpful to familiarise the child with an adult from the school, by arranging a home visit and showing an interest in their room or toys, or perhaps reading a story. Other useful strategies include playing games with siblings, and spending time in the garden. This can relax the child by providing a less enclosed space, and by allowing more physical play.
- ★ If the child is likely to know no-one at the school, it would help if an introduction could be made to at least one child in the class.
- ★ It can be helpful for parents to visit the school or nursery at a time when the children are not there, perhaps before or after opening hours, or during a weekend or holiday. This enables familiarity with the empty building, and as the parent and child explore together, hopefully the child will feel able to speak and hear their own voice in various parts of the building.

How to interact with a new SM child in the classroom:

- ★ In a nursery consider letting parents stay initially to help the child settle.
- ★ Do not put any pressure on the child to talk. Have a quiet word with the child, explaining that you understand that it is difficult for them, and that they can talk when they are ready.
- ★ Create an accepting and rewarding atmosphere, helping the child to feel valued, regardless of any talking.
- ★ Ideally, especially with a younger child, identify one adult to form a special bond with the child, gradually building rapport and confidence. Try a little bit of regular special time, playing or doing an activity without demanding speech. Take a non-directive approach with younger children, following the child's lead and focus of attention, showing interest in their choice of activity. Gradually suggest ways of developing the play or activity, and encourage cooperative play with comments such as 'Why don't we try giving all the animals a ride?' or 'I wonder which one would look nice in here?' Older children will be able to tolerate more structured activities.



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- ★ Give the child plenty of encouragement to interact with the other children.
- ★ Encourage joint activities with a quieter child to see if a friendship can develop.
- ★ Do not insist on eye-contact initially.
- ★ Try some small group or whole class activities in unison, chanting or reciting a well-known rhyme, counting or reading all together. Sometimes it helps to clap or tap a steady rhythm at the same time.
- ★ At story time get the child to sit close enough to the front to be involved occasionally in turning a page, if you also ask others.
- ★ Give praise for any of the child's achievements.
- ★ Do not make the register an issue – accept a smile, nod or raised hand.
- ★ Wherever possible, adapt the curriculum so tasks can be achieved through non-verbal communication as a matter of course, rather than as a substitute for speech.
- ★ Make sure the child is (a) not getting *extra* attention for silence and (b) not *too* comfortable with alternative forms of communication.
- ★ Encourage home/school connections, in the form of artwork taken home or something from home brought to school and shown off.
- ★ Keep open relaxed communication between school and the parents, especially as many parents of SM children are themselves shy and may be embarrassed or resent having attention drawn to their child's lack of communication.
- ★ Remember that the child may have other developmental or educational difficulties, so keep an eye open for these and do not put everything down to the selective mutism.

Sally's teacher wanted answering the register to be enjoyable for the whole class. Every day she chose a helper from the group. When she called out each person's name, her helper had to find that child and shake hands. It became quite a challenge to move round the class as quickly as possible! This activity was beneficial to the children with poor social-communication skills, and allowed Sally to participate without anxiety.

Meesha's teacher tried to keep a careful distinction between curricular activity and social interaction by letting Meesha see that the children who got her attention verbally tended to take priority. She made sure that Meesha got praise and encouragement in other ways though. While some of the class read to the classroom assistant, Meesha worked in a small group on phonological awareness and alphabet skills. Activities included sorting pictures into rhyming groups, recording a tick or a cross to indicate if two words sounded the same, selecting the odd-man-out with a different initial letter sound, sequencing plastic letters into alphabetical order, and matching these letters to pictures with the same initial sound.

The group work gave Meesha confidence and she started to help and talk to the less able children. Meesha was congratulated for this and was soon able to provide this help in front of her teacher.

- ★ Keep an eye open for teasing or bullying, remembering that SM children will not be able to report it for themselves.
- ★ When changing class, the hand-over needs to be carefully planned, ideally with the new teacher coming into the nursery or old class.
- ★ Include individual targets for confidence building and independence if the child is also reticent in situations that do not require speech (see section below for some ideas).

For the timid or frozen child work on:

- ★ Using louder instruments in music sessions.
- ★ Finding a space gradually further away from the wall or the teacher in physical education or hall sessions.
- ★ Joining in mime or movement sessions with bigger, stronger actions.
- ★ Gaining confidence on the climbing apparatus in the hall or playground, perhaps with some extra encouragement in an individual or small group session with a classroom assistant when others are not around.
- ★ Being given jobs or responsibilities in the classroom.
- ★ Running errands, perhaps with another child at first, such as taking the register to the office.
- ★ Using puppets in play or drama, possibly in conjunction with a screen.
- ★ Encouraging artistic expression through clay and painting, movement and dance.
- ★ Trying noisy group activities such as pretending to be big, fierce animals or doing dances accompanied by vocalisation.



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