

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF SPEECH ANXIETY WITH SELECTIVELY MUTE CHILDREN

HANDOUT

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Addressing the Issue of Speech Anxiety



Let the child know you understand their difficulty and the feelings they experience when they try to speak. You know they want to and have tried to speak, but they feel so worried about talking that the words seem to stick in their throat. The language you use and the detail you give will depend on their age, but even very young children benefit from having their problem acknowledged rather than ignored, 'hushed-up' or misinterpreted.

Many children get the message from well-meaning adults that talking is easy, and this is borne out by the fact that no-one else in their nursery, school or street appears to be having any difficulty. Rather than admit they are afraid to speak, they say (and often convince themselves) that they don't *want* to speak. Dispelling this myth can be a tremendous relief, and helps children believe and trust in you and any suggestions you might make to help. For the younger child who may still be very confused about what is happening to them, this acknowledgement gives them a framework within which to manage their difficulties, and makes the situation less frightening.



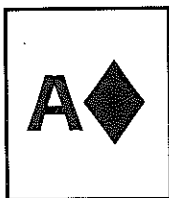
Let the child know they are not alone. This is another relief, and for older children (just as for adults) it can be especially reassuring to be told that their condition has a name (selective mutism), and a recognised form of treatment. Younger children need to know that what is happening is not uncommon, that there is a perfectly good reason for it, and that things will get much easier for them. A calm, informed approach will inspire confidence!



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Impress on the child that the most important thing is for them to be happy, and that they have a friend in you to turn to, if they are feeling upset. You want to help get rid of the nasty feelings they are experiencing. When a child says they do not want to talk, they mean they do not want to feel anxious when they talk. Acknowledge how hard it must be to miss out when you can't make a request, or can't make friends, and how silly it must feel when no words come out. Tell the child you know how horrid it is for them and, what's more, you know how to help make things better. Focus less on talking, and more on having *fun*.



Explain how you are going to help. The way to overcome speech anxiety is to remove any pressure to talk, so that the child does not develop a habit of avoiding speech. By focusing on situations that allow the child to experience pleasurable associations, it is possible to introduce one small change at a time until the child can tolerate previously stressful situations with ease.

Tell the child that there is no need for them to speak until they feel happy and ready to do so. Stress that they can set the pace, and that by doing things they enjoy and feel completely comfortable with, they will gradually be able to do more and more until they are doing all the things that other children do. Even children as young as four years old can see the logic of this approach.



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