

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 with the child when the school or nursery is empty, perhaps before or after opening hours, or during a weekend or holiday. This enables familiarity with the 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:

- ★ Agree times when parents help the child get involved in activities.
- ★ 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.



- ★ Give the child plenty of support 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.



- ★ Assure children you will only choose them to answer if they put their hand up.
- ★ Encourage participation through 'Show' rather than 'Tell'.
- ★ Ask the other children to help by including the SM child both in and out of the classroom and waiting patiently until he or she is ready to talk.
- ★ 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 generally reticent (see section below for some ideas).

For the timid or frozen child work on:

- ★ Using louder instruments in music sessions.
- ★ Blowing, sucking and humming with a recorder, harmonica and kazoo.
- ★ Finding a space gradually further away from the wall or the teacher in physical education sessions (but reassure child you will not pick them to go first).
- ★ 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.
- ★ Activities with character masks which cover the child's mouth.
- ★ 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.

Once children are relaxed and enjoying school:

- ★ Children can record their voices at home on a variety of toys and gadgets and play short messages to friends, relatives & school staff.
- ★ Suggest children read to their parents at home and bring the teacher a recording.
- ★ Listen over the phone while children read to their parents at home.
- ★ Record messages or puzzles for children to solve at home and record their answers.
- ★ Exchange messages via voicemail on a mobile phone.
- ★ Make a treasure hunt using Talking Tins™ and ask the SM child and their friends to do one for you while you are outside the room.
- ★ Encourage communication via a walkie-talkie and gradually get closer.