

## GENERAL MANAGEMENT OF SPEECH ANXIETY IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

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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, fun and friendly around the child.
- ★ Build rapport by doing things that the child enjoys, using favourite toys and activities.
- ★ Talk and read to the child without expecting speech in return, since SM children are often isolated, 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 ...', 'I bet...', 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 concerned about the mutism.



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- ★ Accept natural spontaneous gesture, acknowledging that speech is difficult for the child at the moment, and say 'can you show/find/draw me...' rather than 'tell me'.

#### How the family can support the child in the community

- ★ 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, ideally but not necessarily from the same 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.
- ★ Have the child's voice on the home ansaphone message.
- ★ Get toys with a record-playback facility so that the child can record their name and short phrases and play to other people.
- ★ Avoid ordering/choosing for children but instead let them point to a menu, show you their choice, hold up their fingers to indicate how many, etc.
- ★ Walk further away from other people until child can talk comfortably to you rather than getting into the habit of bending your head towards the child and letting them whisper. You will soon find you do not need to walk so far away each time.

#### 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.'