

Selective Mutism

Classroom Strategies for Teachers

SM children cannot talk as the result of the physical symptoms caused by the extreme anxiety they feel. Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder; a phobia of talking which can only be overcome by



allowing children to take small steps forward in a controlled way at their own pace. They are not being defiant, stubborn, or disobedient.

Do not feel it is your job to make this child speak. It is your job to lessen the anxiety in all classroom activities for this child. Remember this is a genuine difficulty and any pressure to speak will make things worse. Have patience and let the child speak when they are ready.

PLEASE DO

- Removing speech anxiety in day to day situations, you will enable them to fully benefit from an intervention programme;
- Seat the child to the side in the classroom, not at the front or in the centre where everyone is looking at him.
- Avoid eye contact at first
- Let the child know that you will help him, but will not try to force him to talk
- Talk to the child about ways he can communicate with you:
 - nodding his head yes and no
 - keeping cards on his desk to answer yes and no
 - using a pass to go to the bathroom
- Allow nonverbal communication in the school setting, especially in the early months of the beginning of school. The student and you will discover a time that more verbal communication can be encouraged. This may take some time and may never occur, but don't let the nonverbal communication become too much of a crutch. There is a fine line between pressure and encouragement.
- Assure him that you are not going to try to make him talk, but need to find ways to communicate
- Let him know that if he ever feels comfortable enough to talk, that would be ok too
- At registration allow hands-up, involve whole class in a social activity or ask 'Is [each child's name] here?' so that the class looks around and answers in unison;
- Engage the child through physical activity, craftwork, creative projects and fun;
- Talk to the child about what you are doing without expecting an answer. Make comments rather than asking direct questions, e.g. *'This looks like your dog, I can't remember his name though'* rather than *'What's the name of your dog?'*
- Provide the *opportunity* to speak rather than making demands:
 - *'Hmm, I wonder where this one goes?' (pause...);*
 - *'Oh dear, I can't find any round ones' (pause...);*
- Warmly respond to the child's attempts to communicate through gesture or whispering, by talking back in a natural way as if they had spoken
- Ask the child questions via other adults or children they talk to, keeping a comfortable distance until the child can talk easily in front of you

- Reassure the child in private at school that you won't pick them to answer a question, read aloud or demonstrate an activity *unless they let you know they want to be chosen*
- Say they can start talking as soon as they feel ready but until then, just have a good time! It's OK to laugh and it's OK to sing – whatever they feel they can manage.
- Invite the child to let you know if anything is upsetting them or if they have news they want to share via a two-way liaison book with home
- Assist transitions between home and other settings:
- parents to participate with the child in other settings
- Staff to go to the child's home for a visit. Do not expect speech. Just let the child interact with you in any way that he can. He could show you his computer, books, fish, etc.
- Encourage the child's parents to arrange play dates at home or after school in the classroom so that the child can develop a comfort level with other children.
- Talk to the class when he isn't there about his "shyness" and how to respond to him: For example:
 - Be his friend and include him in all activities.
 - Don't try to make him talk.
 - Don't say to people, "He doesn't talk."
 - Do not yell out or overly respond if the child should speak. Act as if it were normal and continue with your activity.
- Let the child come in before or after school to help you in the classroom. Let the child's parent be there if he is more comfortable.
- Do cooperative group activities (small groups) so that he feels more relaxed. He could be the recorder for a cooperative group.
- Try to find time at school for periods of unpressured one to one interaction;
- Encourage the child to sit, work or play with friends they talk to in other settings;
- Organise activities where children talk, move or sing *in unison*, and activities and games which do not require speech, making this clear before you start;
- Provide opportunities to talk in situations the child may find less threatening
- Can you take [new child] to the pegs and show her where to put her bag?'
- 'Take Mummy to the hall and show her what we've been making for assembly', 'Please help [less able child] tidy up - he's not sure what he's got to do';
- Actively support friendships with other children, making sure peers do not push the child to speak and understand that they will speak in their own time;
- Make general use of puppets, masks, voice-activated toys, recorded messages, talking tubes and walkie-talkies which the child may find easier than direct talking
- Ensure the child can access the toilet, meals, drinks, help and First Aid without speaking. Agree a procedure for when they feel ill;
- Have the same expectations for good behaviour as for any other child.

IT IS IMPORTANT for this intervention to include individual sessions with the child. A key person working with the classroom teacher and parents. Hopefully, there is someone willing (preferably someone who is patient and soft spoken), who can be the key worker in your school. The "stimulus fading" strategy starts with one child and then one more at a time is added to form a small group.

Most children with SM will not speak in front of a whole group. Please do not make it your goal as the classroom teacher to make this child talk in the classroom. You will be most frustrated. It doesn't work in a whole classroom setting. The anxiety has to be lessened slowly, in baby steps beginning individually with the child and the key worker.

PLEASE DO NOT

- Be hurt or offended when the child remains silent;
- Confuse a fixed facial expression with glaring, defiance, disinterest or smirking;
- Beg, bribe, persuade or challenge the child to speak, nor make it your mission to get them to talk;
- Make the child to say 'Hello, please, thank you' etc. They are not being rude;
- Ask direct questions which put the child on the spot, especially when others are watching and waiting for an answer;
- Look directly at the child when you are hoping that they might say something;
- Penalise the child for not talking or tell them they are talking too quietly;
- React when the child finally talks. Simply carry on as if they have always spoken, responding positively to what they **say**, rather than the fact that they have spoken.
- Later you can remark on how much fun you had, how good they are at reading, etc.;
- Make the child repeat themselves in public if you don't hear (it's great they're talking it all!) but do say in private, 'Sorry, I don't understand', 'That was a great try but I didn't hear';
- Tell the child off in public – have a quiet word in private to set out your expectations.
- Treat the child with kid gloves – they enjoy banter the same as anyone else!;
- Follow opting out with special treats or privileges;
- Anticipate the child's every need. Instead hold back, give permission ("It's OK to....") and create opportunities for them to start taking the lead;
- Object if the child talks to you via their friends – they could be valuable allies in the child's intervention programme. But make sure the child is comfortable enough to communicate with you non-verbally when needed; for example, they could confirm you heard their friend correctly by nodding or shaking their head;
- Be afraid to say 'Hey, can you keep the noise down!' as appropriate;
- Be surprised if the child looks confused, does the wrong thing or does nothing.
- Anxious children are often too tense to process information quickly or accurately, so repeat your instructions quietly and calmly as necessary;
- Spring surprises on the child but prepare them for changes and transitions with photos, visits and pictorial timetables;
- Allow the child to become isolated - actively foster friendships with peers, both in and out of school through games, shared projects, interests and activities;
- Dwell on what the child *can't* do. Discover their interests and talents and let them shine

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