

Supporting children who are anxious about talking

What Do We Know About Selective Mutism and Reluctant Speakers?

- Children are persistently silent in some specific situations, despite being able to speak freely in others
- Children can typically speak at home and with familiar people, but are unable to do so in other places such as nursery, school, shops and social situations with unfamiliar or large numbers of people
- Selective Mutism is psychological in nature and related to heightened social anxiety. It is not the result of normal shyness, attention seeking or defiant behaviour
- Individuals can appear completely unable to speak and may 'freeze' in some settings as if afraid of others hearing their voice
- Children with Selective Mutism often report that they want to speak but are afraid to, because of the actual process of talking aloud
- Reluctant Speakers can sometimes be described as having a mild form of Selective Mutism as they will talk a little in certain situations



How can I help?

- Never pressure the child to speak, or pause and wait for an answer to a question. The aim is to lessen anxiety rather than force the child to speak; reassure them that you will not do so
- Let the child know that you accept that they find speaking difficult
- Reassure the child that you know they want to speak and that you feel confident that they will speak when THEY feel ready to do so
- Give the child ways to communicate with you without speaking, such as hand gestures or nodding
- Children are more likely to begin to speak to their peers before adults. Do not over-celebrate and make a big fuss if you hear them speaking; instead you may wish to praise privately
- Expect the child to participate in all activities rather than withdrawing them from the classroom/activities when in anxiety-provoking situations as this draws further attention
- Provide opportunities for non-verbal activities
- Ensure that all adults that interact with the child do not inadvertently use negative labels or comments related to their talking for example 'she's the quiet one', 'he doesn't talk'. If the child's peers comment in this way, it is important for adults to explain that the child can talk and will use their words when they feel ready to
- By providing an emotionally safe and calm classroom environment, staff are more likely to be able to support the child through levels of communication, from the use of gestures through to limited verbal responses and ultimately participating fully across all social situations



Ideas to try at nursery/school:

- In circle-time activities, ask who would like to say something instead of expecting each child to have a go.
- Help the child to contribute in a non-verbal way, for example, by holding a prop, giving items out or showing something they have brought from home. At register time, let the children choose between answering the register or raising their hand, let them point to make their lunch choice
- Increase the number of activities where the children talk, move or sing **together**
- Find children who will include the child at playtime
- Make chatty or reassuring comments rather than asking the child questions. Try and make your language indirect (e.g. use sentence starters, visual choices, make deliberate errors)
- Find a teaching assistant to gently befriend, include and encourage the quiet children in the class. Create opportunities for the child to go out of class for 'rapport-building' sessions with a chosen member of class staff



For further information, please see the following website:

<http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/> and publications by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens.