Advice for Reluctant Speakers in Primary School

Selective Mutism is relatively rare; therefore many of us will never have encountered it before and may have no idea how to respond. Recognising that Selective Mutism is an anxiety response, similar to a phobia, may help you to better understand the pupils’ difficulties. Below are some strategies that can be implemented throughout the school day.

Things which help:

- Remember it’s anxiety that prevents the child from speaking, not a like or dislike for you.
- Respond and reward all attempts at communications: eye contact, smiles, and nod. (e.g. ‘good looking’, or ‘lovely smile’.)
- Let the child know that you understand and accept that they find speaking difficult.
- If the child initiates interactions with you or another adult give praise, even if they do not manage to actually speak.
- Encourage and support the child to build a relationship with a key member of staff.
- Support the child or help structure a situation if the child looks lost or unsure: “George, can you help Ben tidy the books away?”
- Involve parents in planning interventions to ensure that the approaches are jointly developed and agreed.
- Use lots of social rewards: smiles, nods, “Well done”
- Reward all efforts to communicate no matter how small.
- Invest time in building up rapport and confidence through non-verbal activities.
- Praise and encourage any skills that don’t involve talking, e.g. running, drawing, playing etc.
- Provide activities where children dance talk or sing as a group and encourage other children to include the child in play.
- Avoid increasing anxiety levels in children who have to wait their turn to speak, by instead asking who would like to tell or say something.
- When the child does use voice, it is essential to act as if it is the most natural thing in the world.

Things which don’t help:

- Pressurising the child to speak in any way.
- Making any reference to any attempt to use voice.
- Giving the child too much attention for either not speaking or for speaking. They are probably self-conscious and may feel uncomfortable with too much attention until they are more confident.
- Using negative labels within their earshot: for instance telling a visitor “She’s the quiet one”. You should also discourage other children from using these labels.
- Pressurising the child to mix with other children as much as their peers might do. They may need more help and support to join with other children.
Selective Mutism is relatively rare and is described as a phobia to talk, that has no one cause. Recognising that Selective Mutism is an anxiety response, similar to a phobia, may help you to better understand your child’s difficulties.

How you can help:

- Think of the reluctance to speak as a result of anxiety about speaking, rather than your child being defiant.
- Reassure your child that you know they have a lovely voice and that they find it difficult to speak in certain situations. Tell them that you understand.
- Reassure them there is no pressure to talk. Encourage other ways to communicate, particularly with less familiar people e.g. waving instead of saying hello.
- Remove the pressure on yourself to make the child speak. Try not to feel worried if your child will not respond to someone; acknowledge that they find it hard at times.
- Try to help the child feel secure and accepted as they are and that in time it will get easier.
- Build confidence and reward any forms of communication, no matter how small.
- Help your child to join in and play with others, for example you could say; Look I think George wants you to help him build a tower.’
- Encourage your child to have play dates and reinforce activities they enjoy and are good at.
- Praise things that your child can do well, that don’t involve talking.
- **When the child does use voice, it is essential to act as if it is the most natural thing in the world.**

Things which don’t help:

- Pressuring your child to speak.
- Withholding rewards for not speaking the child wants to but can’t.
- Bribing your child to talk will not help.
- Using negative labels in front of the child, for example ‘he’s the quiet one’. Try to discourage others from using these labels.

Further information can be found at [www.smira.org.uk](http://www.smira.org.uk)