

## 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.



## Supporting Reluctant Speakers – Information for Parents/Carers

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)

