

## Supporting Children with Selective Mutism – Advice for Parents

### 1. Ensure that your child feels valued and secure

Children with selective mutism get so anxious about talking that their vocal cords freeze and no sound can come out of their mouths. Any anxiety, disapproval or uncertainty they pick up will increase their own sense of guilt, failure and fear about the future – they'll then tense up and find it even harder to speak. It's not just teasing that makes children feel bad about themselves. Repeatedly asking 'Did you talk today?' makes children dread going to school. Asking 'Why don't you talk?' implies that you don't like them the way they are, wish they were different and worst of all, have no idea what to do about it. We need to *tell* children why they find it hard to speak at certain times rather than asking questions they cannot answer. Reassure them that everyone grows up with one or more childhood fears and although they find talking difficult right now, they'll find things much easier as they get older. They need approval whether they speak or not, so be positive about their efforts. The calmer you are, the more relaxed your child will be and the quicker they'll improve.

### 2. Try to reduce embarrassment or anger about your child's behaviour

We have to accept our children as they are and not put them on the spot by pushing them to talk to other people or drawing attention to their speech. Allow them to warm up in their own time, find activities to do together or give them a job to do and they are much more likely to relax sufficiently for their vocal cords to start moving again.

### 3. Build confidence by focusing on your child's achievements

In conversations with your friends, your child and yourself, focus on what your child CAN do, not on what they CAN'T. Support them in their interests and creative talents and find ways in which they can comfortably demonstrate their skills to others.

### 4. Remember how much stress your child is under

Being watchful, anxious and unable to speak for much of the day is a great strain. It's common and can be challenging for the whole family to get the brunt of SM children's pent up emotions but they need you to understand that it is normal to feel this way and to provide a calm, safe place rather than more emotional upheaval. Your child may need a chance to relax completely after school before attempting homework, or a physical outlet for their frustration – trampolining, swing-ball or swimming for example. Violent computer games are NOT a good idea!

When upset, your child may use a flat tone of voice which sounds rude and confrontational. Do not rise to this or you will escalate your child's stress and make things even worse. Recognise it, take a deep breath and continue in a calm gentle tone. If they lash out verbally or physically, calmly reflect, 'I'm sorry you've had such a bad day' and leave them on their own to listen to music, bash a pillow or put it on paper until they feel better. When things are calmer, acknowledge their frustration but explain that the family do not have to suffer their outbursts so will keep out of their way if they try to take it out on other people. Discuss alternative outlets and say that if you know what has upset them there may be something you can do to help.

Finally, look at your own lifestyle. Does your child have good reason to be concerned about *your* behaviour? They cannot improve while they are worrying about you.

### 5. Keep busy and have a routine

Activity and physical exercise are good for mind, body and soul and help to keep anxiety at bay. Sitting around doing nothing increases stress, as does uncertainty about the day's events. Start each day with a plan that includes exercise – whether this is letting off steam after school for younger children or helping with the housework or walking the dog for older children.

## **6. Educate family and friends about the nature of your child's difficulties**

Make sure no-one pressures your child to speak and knows how to react when he or she DOES speak (no fuss!). Help others respect alternative forms of communication – nodding, pointing, smiling, waving, writing, talking through a friend or parent etc.

e.g. Joe needs a little while to warm up, please don't think he's being rude.

Amy will be full of this when she gets home but at the moment she needs to watch and listen before she's ready to join in.

Sam's having a great time and if we just let him join in at his own pace he'll be able to start talking.

Jade can't answer your questions at the moment but she'd love to play with you if you do all the talking today.

Sarah's just going to listen and text her friends while we have a chat.

When Gemma is used to everyone she'll talk as much here as she does at home!

Can you please make sure no-one makes a big fuss when Dale starts talking? If you just talk back quietly he'll find it easy to carry on.

## **7. Establish safe boundaries with your child so they can take small steps forward**

Laughing, singing, talking in unison and talking to parents will be a lot easier than talking to other people. But children are often afraid to do these things in case it draws attention to them and leads to an expectation to speak. Reassure your child:

e.g. Grandma knows you can't talk to her just yet, but it's OK to talk to me and Daddy in front of her.

It's hard to talk to your teacher at the moment but it's OK to laugh.

It's OK to join in the singing, no-one will make you talk afterwards.

It's fine to talk to us here in a very quiet voice, no-one will make a fuss.

You don't need to speak on your own, you can just try joining in when everyone speaks together.

## **8. Ask friends, relatives, shop-assistants etc to speak to your child through you if you know they will not be able to respond directly. e.g.**

'What colour would your son like to try on first?'

'Max, what colour would you like to try on first?'

(*Max points to brown shoes*) 'He'd like to try on the brown ones please.'

'I love Max's blazer. Could you ask him what school he goes to?'

'Max –what's the name of your school?'

'St. Joseph's'

'Max says it's called St. Joseph's.'

If children are relaxed with you in public and know you are not pushing them to talk directly to other people, you will find that they begin to cut out the middle man!

## **9. Make things easier for your child to achieve rather than allowing total avoidance**

e.g. Instead of ordering for your child, ask them to show the waiter what they want.

Instead of avoiding a party completely, go for the first 10 minutes when it's quiet.

Instead of taking something that is offered to your child, ask for it to be put on the table so your child can pick it up later.

If children miss school make sure they stay in bed or do schoolwork during school hours rather than play. Enlist school's support to ensure a positive return.

## **10. Provide an escape route**

If children are anxious about a school trip or going to a friend's house for example, arrange to pick them up at lunchtime so they only go for half the day or say you will phone at intervals to see if they need collecting. Gradually extend the time.

### **11. Let children know what is happening**

Warn children of changes to their routine and prepare them for new events by talking through what will happen. Rehearse or make a game of real-life scenarios such as going to the doctors, opticians, McDonalds or ordering a Chinese takeaway. Take it in turns to be the patient, doctor, server, etc. and practice/write down phone calls.

### **12. Remember that it can be just as scary talking to children as adults**

Help your child play with other children rather than leaving them to get on with it. Join in with them, starting with activities or games where talking is optional, so you can all concentrate on having fun.

### **13. Accompany child but as a general helper rather than their personal assistant**

If the only way your child will attend a school trip, Brownies, football etc. is if you go with them, volunteer yourself as a general helper, make a point of talking to other children and get actively involved to assist socialisation rather than dependency.

### **14. Acknowledge anxiety but do not fuel it with an emotional reaction; provide a diversion or clear plan of action**

Children need brief sympathy followed by matter of fact guidance and strength – not anger or protective cuddles which just confirm that there is something to be afraid of. For example, if they complain of a tummy-ache say 'I know what will help, where's that catalogue you wanted to look at?'. Or if they don't want to go to the doctor's say 'We can take something with us to play in the waiting room. Let's choose something and have a game now'. If appropriate, explain how you or others are going to make situations manageable for your child.

Older children will need to discuss their fears about starting a new school, changing class, going on a school trip etc. Externalise their anxieties by breaking the events down and writing each component on a post-it note – the coach-journey, taking the right clothes, getting to the toilet in time etc. Then sort the post-it notes into 3 columns – things I don't have to worry about, things that worry me a bit and things that worry me a lot. Now you can agree on which part to tackle first and strategies to help. Some post-it notes you will leave to deal with another time but already the anxiety will be out of the child's head and seem more manageable. Unless problems are broken down in this way, children will want to avoid situations completely without understanding the specific source of their anxiety.

### **15. Answer anxiety questions with another question so that your child becomes the problem solver**

Children tend to bombard parents with questions as they try to control their anxiety,  
e.g.           Who's going to be there?           How long will it last?  
                  Have they gone?                        Are you going to use the phone? etc. etc.

Instead of answering (which tends to become very circular) ask a question back so that children start to work out the answers for themselves,

e.g.           Is there anyone you are worried about?  
                  How long do you think you can manage?  
                  Does it matter if they have gone?  
                  Does it bother you if I use the phone?

### **16. Use telephone and recording devices as a stepping-stone to the real thing**

Go to [www.talkingproducts.co.uk](http://www.talkingproducts.co.uk) for lovely ideas for presents and talking practice – children can personalise greetings cards with a recorded message or make a talking photo album for example. If children cannot speak to their relatives or teacher face to face yet, they could leave a message on a mobile phone or have a conversation via a 'Talking Pod' or MP3 player. How about encouraging siblings to take it in turns

to record the message on your home answerphone? Teachers can listen to children reading to their parents over the phone rather than in the classroom.

Finally, children can get used to talking to strangers by practising with voice recognition software (e.g. Virgin Telesales 08457 222333). This builds up both confidence and volume, safe in the knowledge that it's a robot, not a real person. Before you know it they're ordering a Chinese or pizza over the phone!

### **17. If different languages are spoken at school and home, set a good example**

Your child needs to hear you having a go at speaking the school language at school and with their new classmates. Show them learning is fun and mistakes are OK! Ask the teacher if your child can spend some time with other children who speak the same language for part of the day, teaching their vocabulary to English speaking children so everyone sees what it is like to learn something new.

### **18. Make explanations, instructions and reminders visual**

Anxious children quickly feel overloaded, forget things easily and tend to take things literally or at face-value. Anxiety causes 'brain-freeze' so we are unable to take in all we hear and cannot think laterally or rationally. Put things on paper so that children have a checklist to follow rather than trying to remember instructions. If they repeatedly ask the same question for reassurance give them a visual reminder and respond to further questions by asking them to look at this and tell *you* the answer.

### **19. Encourage a very quiet voice rather than whispering**

Accept whispering on the odd occasion if you can genuinely hear and are in a hurry but try not to lower your head so that your child can whisper in your ear. This easily becomes a habit and another form of avoidance. If your child wants to talk to you but is worried about being overheard, either:

- a) turn so that you are blocking your child's view of the person they are concerned about and, maintaining eye-contact, quietly say 'Pardon?' (do not whisper!). Or
- b) move far enough away from the other person so that your child can speak to you face to face rather than in your ear. If you are in the middle of a conversation ask your child to wait a moment before you come and speak to them.

There is no need to explain what you are doing but if your child asks why they can't whisper, explain that too much whispering will give them a sore throat. You can even demonstrate that whispering is easier to hear across a room than a very quiet voice! N.B. This technique only works for parents and people with whom the child has no difficulty talking to when there's no-one else around.

### **20. Push the boundaries, starting with safe strangers**

Do not be afraid to let children go without every now and then so they develop that bit of extra determination to confront and overcome their fears. They'll often surprise you! e.g. Explain you are too busy to stop what you are doing but there is the money if they want to get an ice-cream. Do not get it for them. If the ice-cream van drives away, calmly say, 'Never mind, you can try again tomorrow'. Reassure children that only a couple of words are needed so it's much easier than conversation.

### **21. Celebrate your child's unique qualities**

We cannot change the personality of SM children – and wouldn't want to! They are naturally sensitive individuals who take life seriously and set themselves impossibly high standards. The downside is a tendency to be overwhelmed by novelty, change and criticism; the upside is an empathetic, loyal and conscientious nature. When treated fairly and allowed to show their true colours, SM students often display far more creativity and insight than their peers.