

## **Selective Mutism Top Tips**

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## 1 Tips for School

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- a) Though schools may be very concerned that a child with Selective Mutism is not meeting their learning goals and therefore risks underachievement, this concern can be experienced as pressure by the child and therefore increase their anxiety which underpins their Selective Mutism. It may be worth noting that children with Selective Mutism tend to be very bright and observant, and therefore are able to stay on track academically in the early years even without speaking. For this reason, it is important to not put any pressure on the child and let them go at their own pace. For example, if you are playing the alphabet game in groups or as a class, give the child with Selective Mutism the opportunity to join, but do not put pressure them to say a letter and don't make them feel like they are failing or they have disappointed teachers and the class if they don't contribute.
- b) Do not point out to them that they are not talking to others or make a big deal if they do talk. If they talk, act as if they have *always* been talking.
- c) Ensure to make the child feel as though *they* have the power. The child should lead their own recovery, and to give them such power it is best you go at *their* pace.
- d) Don't put the child in a situation where their fear is exaggerated, for instance don't force them to do a presentation in front of others or put them in the front row. It is about 'nudging', not *pushing* children out of their comfort zone. Therefore, it is best not to ask them to do something that can make them feel different and increase their anxiety too much, such as putting them in a reading group where the expectation is that they read in front of others.
- e) Work closely with the clinician who is seeing the child, as a lot of the therapeutic work will need to be done in school by staff. For example, staff will be encouraged to use the '*Sliding in approach*' – in which a staff member that has a good relationship with the child

is engaged in an activity a room with them, and subsequently another staff member who the child is less familiar with 'slides in' the room without paying attention to the child, then they queue to the child a little bit, then slowly they stay and play with the child and the original member of staff.

- f) Adults visiting the class should be briefed beforehand, so that they do not point out or comment on this person's lack of talking or ask them direct questions in front of other children or adults as this will increase the child's anxiety and put them in a position where they are not in control. They should interact normally with them as if they do speak without however expecting them to speak.
- g) You can still involve the child, but instead of open-ended questions, you can give options so they can nod or shake their head, or even use objects to tap etc. Allow them to choose the way they want to communicate, but feel free to encourage them to be creative and let them know this is okay and will not penalise them.
- h) In order to help the child feel included, you can ask everyone to use their means of communication. For example, everyone can use their hands to answer, clap, do foot tapping, close their eyes or sing a song, etc.
- i) Narrating can be a great way to interact with the child without asking them direct questions. For example, you could think aloud: "I wonder which of these cars are the fastest". Or "I'm see that you are using the red block, I'll use that too. Red is nice", "I wonder if cats are good at jumping", etc. Use statements that do not require an answer but provide an opportunity for the child to speak if they want to. Or spot a parallel to make a connection (e.g., "we're both wearing white shoes!"). Or start with an activity that is easy for the child so that they can join in.

## 2 Tips for Parents

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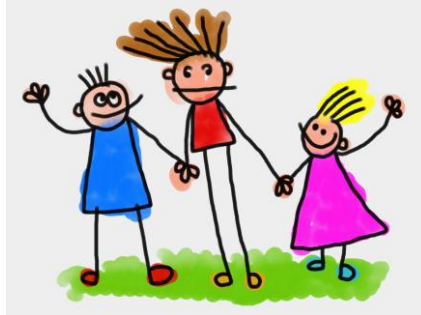
- a) Create a safe environment outside of school, where there is no pressure for your child to speak. Give control back to the child, feel reassured that they *will* speak when they want to.
  
- b) When your child is feeling relaxed start a conversation where you let them that it is okay that they find it hard to talk at school and for now not to worry about talking, as they can still have fun, and that when they are ready they can practice using their voice and being brave. Never mention this during exposure though, only when they are safe with you and the family.
  
- c) Don't ask them WHY they don't talk, as it sends the message it's wrong that they find it hard. Instead try asking them how worried they are on a scale of 1-10.
  
- d) If you are buying food or doing an outing that involves ordering something or speaking to cashiers, ask your child *closed-ended* rather than open-ended questions as this will still enable them to choose what they would like. Again, try not to talk to others about your child's Selective Mutism. You can try to be a bit playfully 'silly' with your suggestions to see if they correct you. For instance, if you are doing a restaurant order 'accidentally' ask them if they would like the wrong thing – so that they feel 'nudged' to correct you – “would you like salad?” (when you are aware that they would rather have chicken or chips). Try not to pressure them to do this, or laugh at them or if they do speak in public comment on this.
  
- e) You may worry that you talk on behalf of your child, as understandably at times you or other family members may find it distressing to witness your child struggling to talk and

therefore intervene to 'rescue them'. Despite this, try to give your child the opportunity to respond, and the time to do that, without however waiting so long that they become distressed. It is about *nudging*, not pushing. Indeed, you are their advocate if they need you.

- f) You may need to find creative ways of nudging and communicating. This may involve scaffolding, and narrowing things down to options, and eventually to yes or no questions. Importantly, it can be helpful to repeat the answer as if your child had spoken confidently! If they whispered chocolate, loudly you can say aloud: "chocolate it is!". This will help empower your child.
- g) Do not talk about the child in front of them to others, for example, commenting on how they talk. Ask other family members and friends not to ask the child direct questions or comment on whether they can speak. They can get the child to join in by commenting or chatting to them.
- h) Praise your child for non-verbal activities if their confidence is low (e.g., drawing, sports, etc). Normalise them and bond with them in other non-verbal ways, e.g., playing the piano, going to the park, etc. Praising their non-verbal achievement (baking, sharing, etc for self-esteem).
- i) Ask them in school, if they decide to talk, who they would like to talk and sit next to? Then if possible, organise for them to sit next to each other, invite them in for a play date in the park, then invite them home, etc.

### 3 Tips for Children and Young People

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- a) Know that you will speak when you are ready.
  
- b) You are in control of the situation. Do not worry and don't pay attention to people that push you. They want to help the situation, but they do not know how so sometimes they might push you without knowing.
  
- c) It is OK to be scared, others are scared too. Everyone fears something. There is nothing wrong with you. When you are ready, things will fall into place.

## 4 Tips for Professionals

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- a) It is not possible to rush work, slow *is* fast. Therefore, it is important to go with the pace of the child. If they want to go fast, go fast. If they need to go slowly, you must go slowly.
- b) Treat them like they are your priority! Don't prioritize their difficulty or the need to be talking. Appreciate their personality, make them feel like a priority.
- c) Make a list of strategies and exercises – games that are non-verbal.
- d) Empower the child/young person as Selective Mutism is linked to their self-esteem – anxiety and concept of being judged.
- e) Remember that when they feel safe - they will be happy to talk.