

An advice sheet for parents, carers and teachers

ENSURING AN ANXIETY-FREE ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE SELECTIVE MUTISM

PLEASE DO:

- ★ Recognise that selective mutism is an anxiety disorder; a phobia of talking which young people can only overcome by taking small steps forward in a controlled way at their own pace. By removing speech anxiety in everyday situations, you will enable young people to benefit fully from an agreed intervention programme.
- ★ Remember that this is a genuine difficulty and it will get worse if the young person feels any pressure to speak or has a sense of being made into a public spectacle. Have patience and let them speak when they are ready.
- ★ Engage the young person through their interests and talents, their sense of humour and by asking for their help. Tell them what a good job they did.
- ★ Include the young person by talking to them in a chatty, friendly way without expecting an answer. Make comments, rather than asking direct questions; for example, 'I'd love to know where this came from, it's gorgeous', rather than 'Where did you get that?'
- ★ Provide the *opportunity* to speak, rather than making demands; for example, 'I love this colour. I wonder what you used to mix it?', rather than 'How did you make this?'
- ★ Warmly respond to the young person's attempts to communicate through gesture or whispering, by talking back in a natural way as if they had spoken.
- ★ Reassure the young person in private that you won't single them out in a group to answer a question, read aloud or demonstrate an activity unless they let you know that *they want to be chosen*. Say that they can start talking as soon as they feel ready but, until then, there are plenty of other ways to get the best out of school, college or work life or their chosen activity. It's OK to laugh or join in when the group speaks in unison – whatever they can manage.
- ★ Give the young person a means of sharing good news and letting you know if anything has upset them, eg through email, a liaison book or a go-between.
- ★ Establish communication and build rapport wherever possible by email.
- ★ Make hands-up, thumbs-up or eye contact and a nod generally acceptable at registration if the young person is struggling to answer.
- ★ Encourage young people to sit or work with friends they talk to in other settings and ask questions through their friends. Move away to make it easier for them to answer.
- ★ Tell the class or group that you welcome all forms of contribution – listening, speaking or making notes.

PLEASE DO:

- ★ Include activities in which speech is optional, making this clear before you start.
- ★ Include the young person in other activities by offering alternative forms of communication. For example: holding up, underlining, circling or pointing to their answer; writing on sticky notes, a dry-wipe board or a computer screen; texting; emailing. Ask them which method they prefer for different activities.
- ★ Provide opportunities to talk in situations that may be less threatening to the young person. For example: 'Please could you take [N] to the lockers and show her where to put her bag?'; 'Why not take your parents to the hall and get them a cup of tea before the rush?'; 'Please help [N]. He's not sure what he's got to do'.
- ★ Make sure that peers don't pressurise the young person to speak and understand that they will speak in their own time. Check for, and stop, actual or cyber bullying and teasing.
- ★ Look for positive behaviour and let the young person know how well they are doing.
- ★ Let the young person sit at the back or side of the classroom to get a good vantage point.
- ★ Encourage general creativity and expression through art, film making and design.
- ★ Encourage independence and ensure success. Rather than doing things *for* the young person, do things *with* them initially and then withdraw, or make things *easier*.
- ★ Have the same expectations of good behaviour as for any other young person.

PLEASE DO NOT:

- ★ Be hurt or offended when the young person remains silent.
- ★ Confuse a fixed facial expression with glaring, defiance, being uninterested or smirking.
- ★ Beg, bribe, persuade or challenge the young person to speak, or make it your mission to get them to talk.
- ★ Make the young person say 'Hi', 'Please', 'Thank you', etc. They are *not* being rude.
- ★ Penalise the young person for not talking or tell them they are talking too quietly.
- ★ Ask direct questions which put the young person on the spot, especially when other people are watching and waiting for an answer. Use comments which they might respond to.
- ★ Look directly at the young person when you are hoping that they might say something.
- ★ React when the young person speaks in public. Simply carry on as if they have always spoken, responding positively to what they *say*, rather than the fact that they spoke.
- ★ Make the young person repeat themselves in public if you don't hear them.
- ★ Chastise the young person in public – have a quiet word in private about your expectations.
- ★ Treat the young person too delicately – they enjoy banter the same as anyone else!

PLEASE DO NOT:

- ★ Expect the young person to initiate interaction, even in ways which don't require talking. Initiation is extremely difficult for most individuals with SM. Make sure that you or other people take the lead to enable the young person to find a partner, get help, obtain an item or report a loss, bullying or illness, for example. It will also be important to ensure access to such basics as the toilet, food and water without needing to speak.
- ★ Follow opting out with special treatment or privileges because this can delay gradual participation.
- ★ Anticipate the young person's every need. Instead, hold back, give permission ('It's OK to ...') and create opportunities for them to start taking the lead.
- ★ Allow the young person to become isolated. Actively foster friendships with peers, both in and outside the educational or work setting, through shared projects, interests and activities.
- ★ Object if the young person talks to you through their friends – they could be valuable allies in the young person's intervention programme. But make sure that the young person is comfortable enough to communicate with you non-verbally when needed; for example, they could confirm the message you received by nodding or shaking their head.
- ★ Be surprised if the young person looks confused, does the wrong thing or does nothing. Anxious individuals are often too tense to process information quickly or accurately, so repeat instructions quietly and calmly, as necessary.
- ★ Spring surprises on the young person. Instead, prepare them for changes and transitions with advance visits, timetables and brochures or photographs, as appropriate.
- ★ Leave the young person out of plans for school or college trips or work experience. These involve environments which are usually much less stressful than the classroom.
- ★ Dwell on what the young person *can't* do. Discover their interests and talents and let them shine. 😊

Other useful handouts

Handout 4 'What to say when ...'

Handout 5 'Selective mutism is a phobia'