

An advice sheet for the adults who children with selective mutism talk to freely and comfortably

Note: this is not for adults who need to prompt or question the child to sustain conversation.

TALKING IN PUBLIC PLACES

An informal approach to generalising speech across different settings

Are you one of the people who a child with selective mutism (SM) talks to easily and spontaneously when no one else is listening? If so, you can gently help them discover that it's 'safe' for other people to hear their voice. Children who have SM need to talk in as many places as possible, so that nowhere becomes 'off limits'. And enabling them to speak to you in public, when other people are nearby, is the first vital step towards expanding their talking circle. This handout will help you gradually achieve this. But please take time to read it a few times for reassurance that the techniques let you work at your child's pace, so they don't become unduly anxious.

You have probably adopted several 'rescue' strategies for when you are together in public places and talking becomes difficult. Perhaps a combination of gesture, whispering and guessing sounds familiar? It's natural to fall back on these modes of communication when children become silent but, unfortunately, these strategies *actually strengthen fear of speaking*. Of course, never pressurise children to talk when they are not comfortable but, equally, don't convey that you think talking is impossible for them. By changing your support strategies, and talking openly about what you are doing and why, you can gently provide the opportunities children need to master their anxiety and gain confidence.

To start, check that you are not falling into any of the rescue 'traps' below when you are *alone* with your child. This is a good time to practise the techniques initially! You will find it increasingly natural to use the same techniques when strangers are in the distance; then as strangers get closer; until eventually your child can even talk to you in front of people they know.

Key: C = child or young person

1 Talk to the child about their fear

When C is relaxed and comfortable at home, talk openly and casually about SM like any other fear. For example: 'Talking feels scary at the moment, but you'll get braver and it will get easier and easier'; 'I know talking feels hard at the moment, but you'll get there'; 'No one will mind if you don't talk straightaway. They know children often need a while to settle in first'; 'It's OK to feel scared about going somewhere new, that's normal. It won't last'.

C needs to believe:

- ★ You are not worried and are confident they'll get over their fear.
- ★ Their fears will pass and are *not* part of their personality.
- ★ If ever they can't answer, it's not a big deal and no one will mind.

2 Smile

Check your face! If you are worrying that C won't talk, your face will be tense and immobile. An anxious face looks like disapproval or sadness to a child. You may be worried on the inside but, on the outside, try to look happy, sound relaxed and act as if it's only a matter of time before C talks.

3 Give your child time to respond

To turn things around, you will need to do the hardest thing of all – **wait** a full 5 seconds after asking a question, even if you sense that C is aware of other people nearby. It's important to talk about this, *not at the time* but when you are both relaxed, using whichever combination of the following explanations feels right.

- a) I'll always give you a chance to answer because I know it's going to get easier and easier for you.
- b) If I guess I might get it wrong.
- c) I'm helping you to be braver about talking. It's OK, you only need to talk when you feel ready, just see how you feel.

★ So ... **wait** a slow count of five. Then, if no response ...

TRAP 1

4 Don't guess!

Do not guess the answer or offer items until C finally nods or chooses one. Every time you guess correctly, C is less likely to talk the next time. C may not be able to answer straightaway but there are several ways to make it easier for them to speak as this handout explains ...

5 Prompt with alternatives (X or Y?)

This is an acceptable alternative to guessing. Give C a choice of two:

★ Prompt by providing an alternative, 'X or Y?', eg

'Shall we go on the slide or swings first?'

'Which pizza do you fancy tonight – mushroom or pepperoni?'

Wait ... If there are more than two choices add 'Or something else?'

Wait ...

★ If there is no response, smile and **move on** (change subject) or **move away**, eg

'That's OK, tell me later' (*don't go to the pizza aisle just yet*)

'That's fine, I can decide' (*don't always choose their favourite*)

'Come round the corner and tell me' (*move to a 'safe' place*).

★ If C tries to communicate by gesture, follow procedure 6.

6 Don't let gesture be a substitute for speech**TRAP 2**

- ★ It's natural for C to point to an object to show what they want; or to answer a 'yes/no' question such as 'Would you like an ice-cream?' by nodding or shaking their head. Follow these up whenever possible with a question where gesture *won't* do, eg 'What sort?'; 'Chocolate flake or no flake?'. Try to ask fewer 'yes/no' questions and keep items out of sight to reduce pointing.
- ★ If C tries to tell you something more complex by using gesture, don't get into a game of charades! Quickly seek clarification, eg 'Sorry, I don't know what you mean'.
- ★ If C doesn't answer, provide an alternative, 'X or Y?', eg:
 - 'Do you want me to *look* at something or *listen* to something?' (C is pulling at your sleeve)
 - 'Are you showing me the *slide* or the *dog*?' (C is pointing across the park)
 - 'Does that mean you want to *go* or you want to *stay* a bit longer?' (C is shaking his or her head)
 - 'Are you thinking it's a *good* idea or a *bad* idea?' (C is looking surprised)
 - 'Does that mean you *can't decide* or you *don't want anything*?' (C is shrugging his or her shoulders).

Wait for an answer (a full 5 seconds).

- ★ If no response, **move on** or **move away**, as described in procedure 5.

7 Don't encourage whispering in your ear**TRAP 3**

The closer people get, the quieter C's voice is likely to become. That's OK, it will get louder as C becomes desensitised to talking in public. Get down to C's eye level, if necessary, and accept a quiet voice, but don't let C hide the fact that they are speaking, by whispering in your ear. This strengthens their belief that talking in public is not safe, making it harder to talk another time.

- ★ Avoid turning or lowering your head, so that C can whisper in your ear.
- ★ Maintain eye contact with C and quietly say 'It's OK to talk here'. Smile and **wait** (a full 5 seconds).
- ★ If no response, give appropriate reassurance, eg 'It doesn't matter if anyone from school sees you – they already know you talk to me'; 'I know you feel worried but nothing bad's going to happen'. **Wait** ...
- ★ If no response, but you have a good idea of what C wants to say, prompt with an alternative, X or Y?', eg 'Cola or lemonade?' **Wait** ...
- ★ If no response, smile and **move on**: 'That's OK, tell me later' (*don't start guessing*) or **move** just far enough **away** so that C *can* talk (see procedure 5).
- ★ If C tries to communicate by pointing, follow procedure 6.

8 Be aware of position

If C is not responding and darts looks at bystanders, it is often the fear of being *watched*, rather than being overheard, that is increasing their anxiety.

- ★ Reduce anxiety by turning away or moving so that you can talk side-by-side, out of people's vision, eg at a wall display or notice board or behind a screen. As C relaxes, gradually return to your original position.
- ★ C may initially feel more comfortable at the side of a room or near a doorway. Respect this and wait for their anxiety to subside before moving to a more central position.

9 Be positive and realistic

Keep your own voice low-pitched and calm and never convey anxiety, frustration, disbelief or disappointment because this will increase C's already negative associations with the expectation to talk.

- ★ If it has taken a lot of persuasion just to get C to attend an event, acknowledge their effort and achievement: 'You're doing really well!'
- ★ Whenever C talks, give a big smile and respond quietly and positively without making a huge fuss about the fact that they spoke, eg 'Oh good – that's my favourite flavour too!'
- ★ Later, out of public gaze, you can be more specific: 'Wow, it was fantastic the way you helped me out there and ignored everyone else in the shop!'
- ★ Occasionally, time is of the essence and you need to be realistic to ensure success. For example, rather than cave in and resort to guessing when you finally reach the fast-food counter, it is better to ask C what they want *before* joining a long queue. There will be plenty of other opportunities to practise at the counter when the place is less busy.
- ★ Don't worry if C speaks extremely quietly – they will get louder the more they talk in public and learn that it is 'safe'.
- ★ Don't ask C to speak louder. C may find this critical or unnecessary. Be natural and honest, eg: 'Pardon?'; 'Sorry, there's too much noise, what was that?'. Let C work out what they need to do!
- ★ If a stranger unexpectedly asks C a question, follow the same routine: smile, **wait**, prompt, **wait** and move on, if necessary, rather than answer.

10 Keep it up!

You may be convinced that these techniques won't work because your child never speaks to you in public when you are close to other people. But perhaps C never speaks in those situations because you have never *consistently* put these techniques into practice!

- ★ Set yourself the task of applying these techniques *consistently* for two weeks before dismissing them.



- ★ Don't expect it to be easy. The techniques may feel counterintuitive at first but children need you to provide the opportunity for them to challenge their fears safely and discover that they can rise above them.
- ★ This is **not** about making children go without things, to force them to speak. It's about calmly conveying that you know C will be able to speak as their anxiety subsides. C will gain strength from your faith in them. You talk to each other at home; it can be the same outside, especially if you move slightly out of other people's vision and earshot.

For example, when it's quiet and there's no queue, don't be afraid to order only for yourself at the fast-food counter, giving C 'a bit longer to think' about what they want. There is now a very good chance that C will tell you while the server gets your order. If they don't, you can return after C has told you at your table (pick a less public one at the side rather than in the centre of the room). There is no question of C going without a meal; C just needs to find the right moment to summon up courage and speak. Persevere and *you will find that moment coming sooner and sooner*.

- ★ If you feel that you are getting nowhere, take a break! Stick to light-hearted comments without asking C any direct questions. Fall back on a question that C can answer by nodding or shaking their head. Then move further away from bystanders and try again.
- ★ Keep a record of where C has managed to speak to you in public; how many other people were present; how close they were; and whether any were connected to C's school or other organised activities. This will enable you to see what progress is being made, what reassurances you may need to give, and how you can gradually increase the challenge next time.

Good luck!

Practise and memorise this sequence!	<p>If C wants to whisper, say 'It's OK to talk here'.</p> <p>Wait for C to speak ... <i>If no response ...</i></p> <p>Offer an alternative, 'X or Y?' <i>or</i></p> <p>Replace gesture with an alternative, 'Do you mean X or Y?'</p> <p>Wait ... <i>If no response ...</i></p> <p>Move on or move away. Don't guess!</p>
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WAIT \Rightarrow REPHRASE 'X or Y?' \Rightarrow WAIT \Rightarrow MOVE ON

Why does this work?

Your child will stay calm and learn that:

- ★ being seen or heard to speak to you in public does *not* lead to increased pressure to speak
- ★ with an expectation to do only what they can manage, there is no need for avoidance strategies.