

HANDOUT 16

An advice sheet for parents and staff working with school-aged children and young people with selective mutism

The Sliding-in Technique™

*A technique to help individuals talk to familiar adults; to be used as part of an overall programme as described in *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual* (Johnson and Wintgens, 2016). The following steps can be accomplished in about 1½-2 hours over a single session or several 10-15 minute sessions held 3-5 times a week (more suitable for very anxious children or when time is at a premium). Children below 5 years of age require the informal version of this technique (Handout 15).*

[P] Parent or other talking partner such as the child's sibling or school keyworker

[N] = Name of child [A] = new Adult



If using school or clinic premises, arrange a quiet place and time for [P] and [N] to play, read or talk together uninterrupted, possibly over several sessions, as the Sliding-in Technique™ cannot start until [N] is comfortable talking to [P] in this setting using their normal speaking voice. Make this easier for [N] by ensuring activities are easy and enjoyable so [N] does not feel tested in any way. This is a good time to find out which rote sequences [N] can recite confidently, e.g. counting, days of the week, months of the year, letters of the alphabet.

- 1 [P] or [A] explains to [N] that they know how hard it is for [N] to talk to new people – whenever they try, a nasty feeling or panic reaction stops the words coming out. You are going to show them a way to get rid of that feeling, so that talking feels much easier. Explain that first [N] will get comfortable talking to [P] and then [A] will very gradually get closer and join in. You'll break it down into such tiny steps that [N]'s usual panic feelings won't have a chance to build up. [N] is bound to feel a bit worried or anxious at first because it's new, but not enough to stop them talking. You will tell [N] exactly what they need to do as you go along and they must make sure you only change one thing at a time – that's the secret to making it work! Stress that it's up to [N] how far you go in each session – you will only continue for as long as they feel comfortable, or until it is time to stop (always tell [N] how long the session will last).
- 2 Introduce an appropriate recording system such as a sticker chart for younger children, where you will write the instructions for each target as you go. Each target can be described as a target, goal, assignment or step, depending on [N]'s age and interests. After each target is achieved, [N] will check it off with a tick, sticker or star; or if older, a note of their anxiety level on a scale from 0 (no anxiety) to 5 (panic stations). Older teens with

good understanding of the rationale are usually able to work through without checking off each step but it will be useful to check their anxiety level intermittently, asking them to hold up 0-5 fingers. Over 3 fingers and you need to take a break, slow down or repeat earlier targets to bring their anxiety down. Write down (or *draw* for children with comprehension difficulties) 2-4 targets that [N] has *already* achieved; e.g. listening and learning about SM, a rapport-building activity with [A], and two talking activities they recently did with [P] like playing a game, reading aloud or counting to a hundred in tens. Use these to show [N] how the recording system works – a nice bonus for young children as they get stickers straightaway!



After every target achieved, [A] returns to congratulate [N], check off the target and set a new target. Keep things very calm and don't rush selecting a sticker, etc. This is an important time for [N]'s anxiety level and heart-rate to drop before attempting the next target. When [N] does particularly well and uses a louder voice for example, feel free to give TWO stickers!

- 3 Now the target-setting begins. Each target will be explained and written down one at a time, in a confident manner: 'This is what we do next', rather than 'Shall we try this?' or 'Do you think you can manage this now?' [N] is told that to make it as easy as possible, the first target is to repeat the talking activities with [P] that they have just checked off; [A] will leave the room, close the door and move some distance away while they do them (in open-plan homes you may get away with going round the corner and waiting out of sight). The targets are different of course, because now [N] knows that [A] is outside. Write down the first target (an activity that involves talking, is very easy to do, and takes less than 3 minutes). Agree a signal so that [N] or [P] can let [A] know they've completed the target (e.g. ring a bell, knock on the table or open the door). [A] takes up their position, but may return to the door a little early to see if they can hear [N]'s voice.
- 4 Afterwards, [P] may report that [N] was not able to talk or spoke in a whisper. In both cases [A] takes responsibility and says that they were standing too close for [N] to talk or 'use their big voice'; e.g. 'I'm not surprised you found that hard, you must have been very worried that I could hear you'. Add an extra clause to [N]'s target ('...with [A] waiting... at the end of the corridor/in the staffroom/upstairs/in the garden' etc.) to stress that it will be impossible for [A] to hear [N]. Repeat steps 3 and 4 until [N] achieves, and checks off, both targets.



If ever [N] does not achieve a target, this is because the steps were not small enough, and not because [N] failed. [N] does not get a sticker, etc. on these occasions but this is not mentioned; attention is diverted to a different target. Keep the focus on achievement, rather than disappointment.



It is essential that [N] uses voice throughout the programme, albeit at reduced volume. If whispering is allowed to persist, [N] will not learn that their anxiety can be overcome. There is no need to spell it out, but it will soon become clear to [N] that the targets are to talk rather than whisper. [A]'s ongoing feedback will be very important, e.g. 'Oh no, I've scared your big voice away, haven't I?!'



***If [N] does not achieve a target, make the target easier or:
For short sessions, terminate the session early: focus on achieved targets and congratulate [N] on doing so well. Do not fill the remainder of the time by repeating targets or doing an unchallenging activity as this loses momentum and removes the need for [N] to stretch themselves.***

For long sessions, take a break: [A] leaves [N] to relax with [P] for a while. Then repeat the last two successful targets and progress in smaller steps.

5 If [A] is a considerable distance away, repeat the activity with [A] a bit closer until [A] is at least in the same building!

6 Now change the activity to counting if this has not already been done. [P] and [N] will count to ten, then twenty, taking it in turns; [P] says 'one', [N] says 'two' and so on. Aim for a good pace and steady rhythm (slightly faster than one digit per second).

If [N] whispers, make it easier by changing the target to [P] and [N] counting to ten together; then counting together to nine with [N] saying 'ten' on their own; before trying the original target again.



It is essential for [N] to start each target with voice. In this way, even young children can notice the exact moment that their throat tightens to a whisper, and become increasingly adept at recovering the original relaxed sensation. A target can be regarded as achieved as long as [N] starts and finishes with voice.

7 The next target is to repeat the counting activity as [A] approaches, hopefully to just outside the door, but this will depend on [A]'s starting point. [A] returns to the same location while [P] and [N] count alternately to ten to get [N]'s voice 'flowing'. Then, as [P] and [N] continue to twenty, [A] walks towards the door ([A] agrees to count to ten before starting their approach). Continue to change either [A]'s starting position or the activity (e.g. take it in turns to say the days of the week or letters of the alphabet) until [N] can talk with [A] standing right outside the room.

8 Repeat the counting activity to ten, but this time [A] will not quite shut the door on their way out of the room – the door should be pulled to, but not closed. At the end of the activity [A] does not wait for the agreed signal and enters the room to congratulate [N]

and check off the target. It is now established that the signal is not needed as [A] can hear and knows when [P] and [N] have finished.

If [N] whispers throughout, [P] and [N] repeat step 7, counting alternately to ten with the door fully closed to recover [N]’s voice. Then repeat with [A] opening the door a fraction just before the end of the counting. If [N]’s voice drops to a whisper for their last few numbers, it is time to terminate the session or take a break. It may help to tell [N] that you have already heard their voice through the door, and to remind them that you are not planning to come into the room at the moment. If they can manage to keep their voice going with the door not properly shut, they will have faced their biggest challenge and their anxiety will start to fade. Once achieved, the next target is to open the door fractionally halfway through the counting and finally, to repeat step 8.



At the start of every new target-setting session, ease [N] back to the point they reached before by repeating the last 2-3 targets achieved at the previous session. By keeping targets short it should always be possible to progress forward at each session, despite back-tracking initially.



If targets are repeated within the same session, do not write them out again. [N] adds a second sticker or tick to the same target to represent consolidation rather than progress. When repeating previous targets at the start of a new session however, write them out again as they represent a significant new starting point.

9 Repeat step 8 but [P] and [N] will count to twenty (or as high as [N] can manage easily), taking it in turns. Even though the door is pulled to, [N] is told they are doing very well to count with the door open. If [N]’s voice is extremely quiet but more than a whisper, repeat with another rote sequence like the days of the week, months of the year or letters of the alphabet, depending on [N]’s age.

10 The next target is for [P] and [N] to count to 20 as before, with the door pulled to but not fully closed; this time [A] will s-l-o-w-l-y open the door halfway through the counting, ‘just a little bit, not enough for me to come in’. Aim to open the door a good 15 cm for the last few numbers.

If [N] whispers, open the door by smaller degrees, or don’t open it until later in the counting sequence. Eventually [N] will be able to talk with the door open 15cm, but it may be necessary for [N] to rest and resume another day.



Be flexible and take steps faster or slower according to [N]’s anxiety level. For example, if [N]’s voice is quiet but strong at step 10, combine 11-13 and have [A] join in the counting as they open the door and walk into the room.

11 It is now time for [A] to join in the turn-taking circle *from their position outside the room.* [P] and [N] count alternately to 10 but then [A] says ‘eleven’, [P] ‘twelve’, [N] ‘thirteen’ and so on up to 20. If young children are only confident counting up to 10 or 12, [A] joins in after [N] says ‘six’.

- 12** Repeat with a different rote sequence depending on [N]’s age (see step 8.). This time [A] joins in from the beginning after [P] and [N] have taken their turns.
- 13** A turn-taking count to 20 is repeated with [A] entering the room halfway through, s-l-o-w-l-y opening the door, stepping into the room, closing the door and walking over to sit with [N] and [P] as they finish counting to 20. If [N]’s voice is fairly strong and [N] is good at counting, [A] does not end there but continues by saying ‘twenty-one’, looking to [P] to continue the sequence. Stop counting at 30 and give [N] *two* ticks, stickers or stars; not only was the current target achieved, but also the next (counting in a circle with [A] sitting at the table).

If [N] looks surprised and does not continue the extended sequence, nothing has been lost. [A] simply apologises straight away with a comment such as ‘Oh no! You were doing so well, I went onto the next target by mistake – sorry, that’s my fault’.

If [N] whispers, mouths the words or says nothing as [A] approaches, build up to this target slowly by stopping as soon as [A] has opened the door; and repeating with [A] coming further into the room each time. Or [A] can enter the room backwards and take an outward-facing chair at the table, delaying eye-contact until step 14.

- 14** Repeat the previous target, explaining that [A] will walk over and sit down to finish the counting. The real difference this time is that [A] is not going to leave the room at the start of the counting, but there’s no need to draw attention to that when writing the target. [A] stands at the doorway while [P] and [N] start off the counting; approaches the table at about number 8; sits down at about number 15 and continues counting to 20 while sitting at the table. If [N] does not sound anxious and makes eye-contact with [A], skip the next step.



Step 14 is omitted when working through in a single session or if [N] and [P] are sitting very near to the door.

- 15** [A] no longer needs to move away from the table. Count to 10 in the usual order followed by the days of the week, then go back round the circle in *reverse* order, counting to 10 and saying the days of the week. This gets [N] used to speaking after [A] rather than [P]. Or substitute any of the sequences listed in step 8. [N]’s voice may be quiet but should not sound strained.
- 16** At this point, [N] is ready for structured turn-taking games or activities requiring a single word response. See Appendix A, The Selective Mutism Resource Manual for ideas, and progress to sentences after 2-3 activities, ensuring that [N] has no difficulty with the content or skills required. It’s important for [N] not to worry about *what* they are saying;

the focus is on staying relaxed so that [N]'s voice can flow. Keep all activities as short as possible, to save time and maintain momentum. Reverse the order of turns so that [N] both responds to and addresses [A].

[N] may still be looking at [P] while addressing [A], in which case introduce an activity which involves [N] looking at [A] to get a clue or signal.



If [P]'s time is limited, or sessions are difficult to arrange, [P] can slide out after one turn-taking game at Step 15.

17 The final step is for [N] to repeat an easy activity with [A] alone, on the understanding that [P] will be returning later on. [P] waits for the activity to get started and then leaves the room. If more than one talking partner has been involved (both parents, for example), [N] chooses who will leave the room first, and carries out this step first without [P1] and then without [P1] or [P2]. This is a great achievement, [A] has now become one of [N]'s talking partners, and can conduct the next session without [P] present.

Sliding out [P] is vital for [N]'s independence and confidence in talking to others. If smaller steps are needed, [P] can initially move to a different part of the room or just watch before leaving the room. Likewise, [P] may accompany [N] to the next session but leave the session for longer periods. Next, [N] should start the session without [P], knowing that [P] is going to join them for the final activity..



It is sensible to consolidate use of single words and sentences by playing a couple of games for each type of language activity – picture-naming, picture description, questions and directions, etc. But do not delay generalisation to other people and other settings unnecessarily.



Once speech has been established with [A] in this way, [A] becomes a talking partner [P] and can use the same technique to establish talking with other adults and peers and gradually increase group-size. Sessions can generally move at a faster pace now, without such detailed breakdown into small steps. Support the development of spontaneous speech by only gradually moving from structured to unplanned activities (see *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual* for ideas).

Progress Chart 4: Talking to a new person using the Sliding-in Technique™

Stage of one to one interaction* with new person and individual target milestones		Date achieved
N/A	Talk when alone with parent/other talking partner (e.g. keyworker) in a quiet room with no interruptions. New person does not need to be involved.	
N/A	Take it in turns to count to 20 with talking partner [P] and say other rote sequences such as the days of the week/months of the year/alphabet.	
N/A	Take it in turns to count with [P], knowing that new person [N] is a short distance away. [P] starts off the counting.	
N/A	Take it in turns to count with [P]; [N] is outside the closed door.	
N/A	Take it in turns to count with [P]; [N] is outside and door not shut properly.	
N/A	Take it in turns to count with [P]; [N] is outside and opens the door about 15cm towards end of counting.	
N/A	Take it in turns to count with [P]; [N] is outside and door open 15cm.	
4	Take it in turns to count with [P] and [N]; [N] stays outside and door is open 15cm.	
4	Take it in turns to count with [P] and [N]; [N] enters room while counting and i) stands by door, ii) approaches table, iii) sits at table.	
4	Take it in turns to count with [P] and [N], starting with N inside the room: i) standing by door, ii) sitting at table.	
4	Participate in turn-taking sequences for counting, days of the week and possibly months of the year/alphabet with [P] and [N] at the table, in both directions: i) takes turn after [P]; ii) takes turn after [N].	
4	Participate in structured single word turn-taking games/activities with [P] and [N], in both directions.	
4	Participate in structured sentence-level turn-taking games/activities with [P] and [N], in both directions: i) gives clues, ii) asks questions, iii) gives instructions.	
6/7	Participate in structured single word/sentence-level games/activities with [N], while [P] waits: i) across the room, ii) outside the room.	
7	Participate in structured sentence-level games/activities with [N]. i) [P] joins in at the end of the session, ii) [P] doesn't attend session.	
8	Use connected speech with [N] to: i) give instructions, ii) ask questions, iii) continue a conversation.	
*Model of Confident Talking: Stages of One to One Interaction (2015) Johnson and Wintgens		

- N.B. The pupil's voice may be quiet but must not be whispered or strained.
 Each target is broken down into smaller steps as necessary to reduce anxiety and ensure success.
 Whole targets, or steps within targets, may be bypassed for fewer steps.
 Several targets may be completed in the same session.
 Generalisation to other people may start at Stage 7*.

Progress Chart 5: Generalising speech from one to one interactions to the classroom

Part 1

Summary of individual targets (Sections A., B. and C. may be carried out in tandem)		Date achieved
A. Sliding in new peers and staff to group activities (all targets take place with no-one else present)	Talk to keyworker in structured sentence-level activities on a one-to-one basis (in a private room outside the classroom or in classroom, no-one else present).	
	Talk to keyworker plus a peer of pupil's choice, working from single word to sentence-level activities.	
	Adding one peer at a time, talk to keyworker and up to 5 peers of pupil's choice in a structured sentence-level group activity.	
	Repeat group activities without keyworker support.	
	Talk to keyworker plus teacher, working from single word to sentence-level activities.	
	Complete a sentence-level activity with teacher; keyworker is not present	
	Complete a sentence-level activity with keyworker, teacher and up to 5 peers. Start with a low risk activity, e.g. reading aloud	
	Repeat group activities with different peers (keyworker and pupil take it in turns to choose next peer) <i>and/or</i> work in different locations (see section B) until at least half the class have heard the pupil talking.	
	Include classroom related topics/activities in group session.	
B. Structured activities in settings where pupil may be overheard	Repeat individual or group activities in other settings where the pupil is <i>unlikely</i> to be overheard, including the pupil's classroom (e.g. empty class at lunchtime, playground during lessons, vacated assembly hall)	
	Repeat individual or group activities in settings where the pupil may be overheard by a <i>few</i> people (e.g. original room with the door open, original room with peer(s) or adult(s) working separately at another table, dining room before lunch, corridor during lessons, table outside own classroom, corner of playground)	
	Repeat individual or group activities in settings where pupil may be overheard by <i>many</i> people (e.g. dining room at lunchtime, corridor between lessons, in museum during school trip, centre of playground)	
C. Preparation for transfer to class	The pupil has been reassured that they won't be picked to answer a question or read aloud in front of the class <i>unless they volunteer</i> .	
	Practise roll call in small group sessions	
	Half the class have heard the pupil talking outside the classroom <i>or</i> the whole class has heard a recording of the pupil's voice <i>and/or</i> pupil and teacher are confident that peers will not comment when the pupil starts to talk	

N.B. If the pupil reverts to a whisper or strained voice at any point, repeat the activity or make target easier to regain voice.
For pupils making a 'fresh start', omit Sections A and B.

Progress Chart 5: Generalising speech from one to one interactions to the classroom

Part 2

Summary of individual targets (Sections A, B and C complete)		Date achieved
D. Transfer to classroom setting	Consider the pupil's positioning for the first three items, as they will not want the rest of the class to see their lips moving initially. *refers to peers that the pupil has spoken to comfortably in previous small group sessions.	
	With the rest of the class occupied, talk to keyworker at own table/work station during class time: a) on a one to one basis b) with other peers* seated at same table	
	With the rest of the class occupied, talk to peers* during class time: a) in a paired activity b) in a group activity	
	With the rest of the class occupied, talk or read to teacher at the pupil's table/work station or at the teacher's desk: a) on a one to one basis b) with other peers* seated nearby	
	As the pupil gains confidence talking to individuals and small groups in the classroom, move onto the final section where they talk in front of the whole class (flexible order)	
	Keyworker practices class activities in advance with the pupil or allows pupil to check their answer with them first to give pupil the confidence to put their hand up to answer a question or take their turn for a pre-arranged question	
	Take turn in a low-risk whole class activity involving a familiar rote sequence or reading aloud (e.g. go round class counting in twos, fives or tens; take part in a play-reading; read aloud from a powerpoint presentation assignment)	
	Participate verbally in roll call (can be made easier if pupils call out their number in the register, rather than 'Good morning' etc.)	
	Participate verbally in Circle Time when given warning/preparation time for topic/activity	
	Volunteer an answer without checking with keyworker	
	Participate verbally in Circle Time without warning of topic or answer unplanned question	
	Note any other contribution to class discussion, either prompted or voluntary:	

E. Talking in public places	Have lunch and chat with peers the pupil can talk to in group sessions.	
	Participate in class assembly by singing or speaking in unison.	
	Read aloud in a class assembly which includes a warm up activity such as singing or speaking in unison.	
	Work on a class assignment <i>outside the classroom</i> with peers the pupil can talk to (e.g. collect leaves and name as many different trees as possible).	
	Show a new or younger pupil around the school.	
	Talk to peers at afterschool club or other organised activity (e.g. on coach during school trip, in swimming pool changing room).	