

Informal ways to work through the stages of confident talking

1. Staged questioning, at child's pace

Introducing questions to someone with selective mutism

*move on only as
child participates
and responds*

Chatty comments with rhetorical questions that need no answer (e.g. 'This is fun, isn't it!' 'I wonder what this is?')

Show me/Which one? requests that can be answered by pointing

Yes/No questions that can be answered by nodding or shaking head

X or Y? questions that can be answered with one word

Simple questions that can be answered with one word

Factual questions that can be answered with a phrase

Leave open-ended and personal questions until later (e.g. 'How's school going?' 'What do you think?')

*pull back if
child freezes*

N.B. Comments always outweigh questions!

2. Talking through parent or a friend

- Use parents or friends as 'go-betweens'
- Provide space to talk together, e.g. 'Why don't you two go into the book corner to discuss your plan' (*keep your distance and/or pretend to be occupied*)
- Ask questions via the friend/parent, e.g. 'Could you ask Pria where she put her lunchbox?' 'I expect you've got a favourite teacher – Mum, do you know who Joe's favourite is?' (*prime parents to redirect the Q rather than answer!*)
- Ask child to communicate via friend/parent, e.g. 'Tell Ben whose table you want to be on and we'll get it sorted',
- Move away or turn away initially, so that the conversation is private
- Gradually get closer until child talks to parent/friend in your presence
- It won't be long before they answer you without waiting for parent/friend to repeat the Q

3. Ensure parents do not remove the child's need to speak

- Help them to stop answering for their child (see next page)
- They should not allow child to whisper in their ear (move to where child can talk face to face)

An advice sheet for parents of children with selective mutism (SM)

Do I answer if someone asks my child a question?

The short answer is No!

It's natural to step in when you see your child freeze. But if a child gets used to someone answering for them, they will adopt the role of silent partner whenever that person is around. One day they *will* answer and it's so important to have everything in place for that moment when they are ready to speak out.

A few Golden Rules :

Do not answer for your child. If you adopt the routine that follows, your child will learn that it's not so bad to be asked a question; everyone seems relaxed about it, whether they answer or not. They'll be far less wary of social situations in general.

Do not put your child under pressure to answer. Calmly convey that it's fine if they answer and fine if they don't. You know they're trying hard and doing their best.

Do not apologise for your child. They'll feel they've done something wrong. If appropriate, you can always explain later that your child wasn't being rude, or share how it makes you feel that others don't see your child as they really are.

But now the long answer...

Follow this routine whenever someone asks your child a question and you'll be surprised how much easier it gets and how quickly your child succeeds in answering. *It's not usually necessary to tell younger children what you're doing or why*, but if they ask or you want to prepare an older child, see 'Why does this work?' below.

1. **WAIT** for a full 5 seconds (slowly count to 5).
If your child nods or shakes their head for Yes/No, that's fine. Add a comment to move the conversation on, e.g. 'Yes, we came last week, didn't we?' But with other sorts of questions your child will probably find it easier to answer if you don't look at them - fiddle with something if it helps!
2. If no response, make it a private conversation between you and your child:
 - gently **repeat** the question or
 - turn it into a **choice** 'X or Y?' or
 - **rephrase** it so that your child only needs to say Yes or No or nod or shake their head.
3. **WAIT** for a full 5 seconds.
If your child answers or gestures, smile and add a comment to move things on. Keep any acknowledgement of this great achievement for a private moment - your child doesn't want attention drawn to their talking in public.
4. If no response, **MOVE THE CONVERSATION ON** without answering, e.g.
 - say to your child 'We'll have a think about that, won't we?' or 'Tell me later'
 - ask the other person a question to divert attention from your child
 - change the subject
 - say your goodbyes

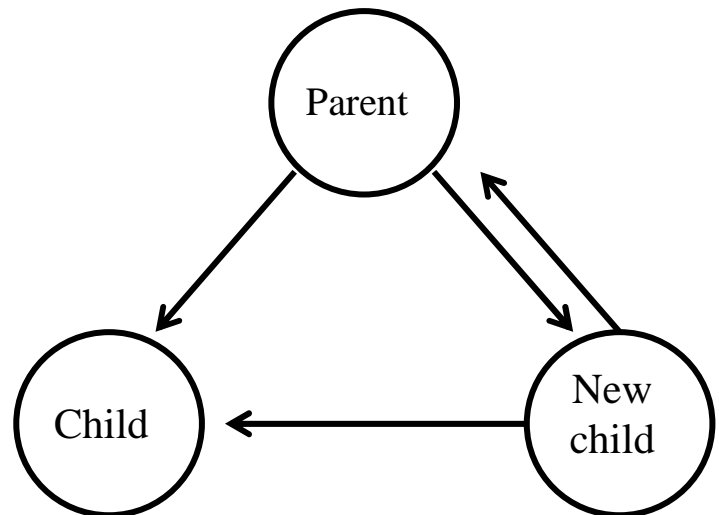
Why does this work? Your child will learn, *without any pressure*, that:

- questions are for the person who's been asked – no-one else will answer
- you know they will get good at answering if they keep trying
- *it's not a big deal* if they don't manage it, no-one minds, it's still a good day!

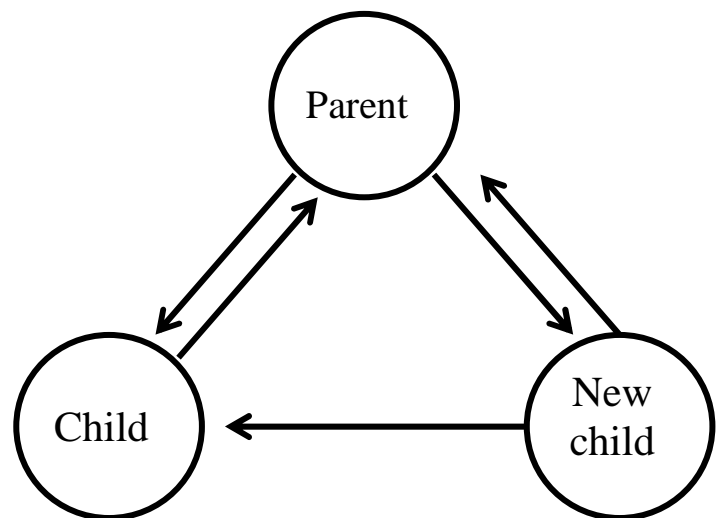
WAIT \Rightarrow **REPEAT/REPHRASE** \Rightarrow **WAIT** \Rightarrow **MOVE ON**

4. The Triangle Tactic

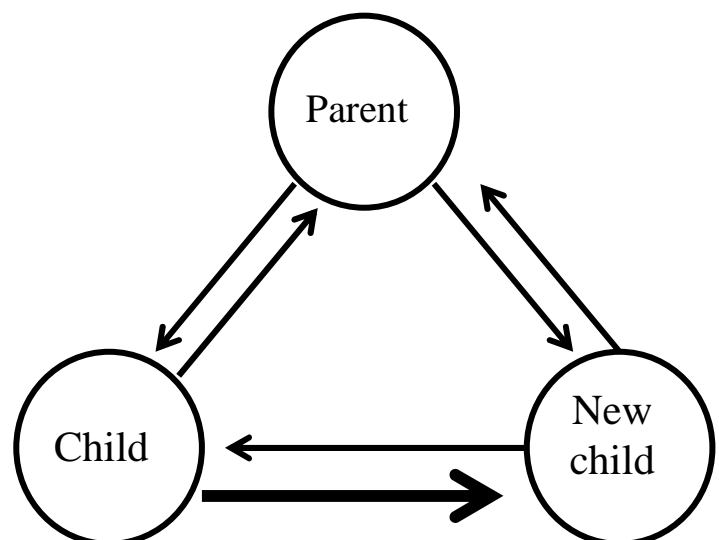
- a) Parent talks to children individually, redirecting new child's comments or questions as needed by asking Yes/No questions that their child can answer with gesture. As their child warms up, parent asks them 'X or Y?' questions and waits 5 seconds to encourage one word answers.



- b) Child starts to talk to parent. Parent passes bits of each interaction on to the other child to keep both involved in the same conversation. As child answers with single words more easily, parent asks them more general questions.



- c) Child talks more to parent and starts to make more general comments. Parent continues to redirect new child's questions but waits a full 5 seconds before doing so. Parent also introduces a 5 second pause before responding to new child's comments, creating more opportunities for their child to cut out the middle man and talk to new child directly.



5. Reading Aloud

This is an excellent starting point for children and young people who are competent readers and are able to read aloud when on their own with a keyworker. As such it represents the quickest route to establishing speech, but should never be adopted if it causes distress or 'shut-down'. An advantage of this method is that it does not require a parent or other talking partner's presence. Reading aloud is usually less daunting than other verbal activities as the child does not have to worry about saying the wrong thing or being expected to enter the unpredictable and personal world of conversation. Success is dependent on the child knowing that their difficulties are understood, and trusting that by reading aloud they will not suddenly be expected to speak any more than they feel comfortable. It also helps to sit beside rather than opposite the child, following the text so the child does not feel scrutinised as they read. Young children may approach this route via reading groups, where children read the same text in unison and join in as best they can, following the text with their finger and saying whichever words they can manage. Older children and teenagers may be able to read aloud following a period of rapport-building and explanation of their difficulties: introduce it by saying that you understand that certain things like being asked unexpected questions can be very difficult, but that reading aloud is usually easier because they won't need to find their own words to express themselves.

Activities can be moved towards true communication in a few sessions as follows, starting with a familiar paragraph or piece of work that the child has looked at in advance:

- a) child reads a short passage.

If voice is steady and audible rather than whispered or strained, it is possible to go straight to d). Otherwise use b) and c) for smaller steps to improve voice through repetition and gradual relaxation.

- b) keyworker and child take it in turns to read alternate sentences from a short passage or familiar poem.

- c) (emphasis moving from reading to more interactive turn-taking):

Keyworker and child read different characters' lines from a set number of pages or for a set number of minutes (local amateur dramatic companies will have comedy and pantomime scripts you can borrow and TV scripts are available to download. See also 'I Say!' in STASS catalogue.

or Child reads out numbers, the days of the week and months of the year and then says them alternately with the keyworker, aiming for steady pace, rhythm and voice (may be quiet but should not be strained).

- d) reading games and activities involving turn-taking, questions and answers. e.g. the keyworker asks questions that can be answered by reading out from the text; the child reads out crossword clues for the keyworker to solve.
- e) activities involving turn-taking, questions and answers without reading

6. Telephone

- voice messages →voicemail →answering Qs via phone →talking face to face