

## Maintaining factors

Children with selectively mutism (SM) can only speak freely to a small number of people. They experience feelings of panic and extreme anxiety when they're expected to talk to anyone else – this has nothing to do with the person they're trying to talk to, it's an automatic reaction that developed in the past at a time when they found talking difficult. Without realising it, friends, family and staff may *strengthen* this fear of talking by

i) putting pressure on the child to speak (often in quite subtle ways)

ii) allowing the child to opt out of social situations altogether.

We need to take all pressure *off*, and then support the child to gradually face their fears in small manageable steps at their own pace.

## Possible home factors that maintain silence / delay improvement

- child frequently hears 'He/she won't talk', 'Don't expect him/her to talk' etc.
- the child's anxiety about talking is not openly acknowledged
- child is pressed to talk when clearly uncomfortable
- mutism causes family members great anxiety/embarrassment which is conveyed to the child and puts on pressure (e.g. frequent questioning about progress; voicing concerns; giving encouragement (rather than helpful strategies); asking child why they behave as they do and when they are going to change)
- child is set unrealistic targets or offered a reward to talk
- little expectation or need to speak/communicate
- parent/sibling acts for child to spare embarrassment/anxiety/disappointment (e.g. answers for child; takes something that is being handed to them)
- silence is modelled as a reaction to strangers or to express anger
- there are few opportunities to mix or observe social interaction outside the family
- intense warnings about speaking to strangers/taking risks
- child is allowed to miss any activity that causes anxiety, rather than modifying the activity as necessary and helping child to understand and manage their anxiety
- love/cuddles are given for withdrawal rather than participation

## Possible school factors that maintain silence / delay improvement

- the pupil's anxiety about talking is not openly acknowledged
- pupil senses disapproval from peers/adults for not talking
- pupil feels under pressure to speak (e.g. invited to contribute and put on the spot; dreads that might be chosen to answer a question/read aloud)
- adult looks at pupil while waiting for an answer or insists on eye-contact
- rewards are in place for what pupil *might* do, rather than what pupil actually does
- pupil feels unrealistic expectation to speak, eg. 'Are you ready to talk to me today?' 'I can't help you if you don't tell me'; unrealistic targets are set with no strategies
- always a large audience/possibility of someone overhearing/ little opportunity for one to one with an adult or working with friends that the pupil talks to at home
- pupil is expected to initiate requests for help/toilet or report illness/bullying etc. when unable to do so
- teasing/demands to talk from peers or over-protection, e.g. 'he/she can't talk'
- lack of social relationships/ isolation/ ignored by peers and/or teachers
- breakdown of trust (e.g. teacher given video/tape without pupil's consent; mixed messages/expectations from different staff members)
- no need to change – alternative forms of communication are used as a replacement for talking, rather than a stepping-stone towards talking
- attention is drawn to the fact that the pupil has spoken, rather than continuing a normal conversation