

SHY AND SELECTIVELY MUTE CHILDREN OF NURSERY AGE

Guidelines for nurseries and play-groups

1. When parents approach play-group leader/nursery supervisor it is useful to ascertain present language level, i.e. how long has child been talking and whether he/she talks away from home, to other children or strangers, or other members of the family. Is the child considered shy and are there perhaps others in the family who are also shy?
2. If there is non-speaking with strangers the play-group leader might suggest visiting the home prior to the child commencing in the nursery. It might be necessary to repeat this several times to enable the child to get to know at least one person from the nursery. Also, it would help if the child got to know at least one child or more currently attending the nursery so they do not feel a total stranger.
3. Selective Mutism is nowadays considered a sign of anxiety, not a form of stubbornness as viewed in the past. Therefore, once the child has been admitted, no pressure should be put on the child to talk, but plenty of encouragement given to interact. It is important to create an accepting and rewarding atmosphere in which the child feels comfortable, whether he/she talks or not. Accept that he/she may not like to make eye-contact, as SM children often find this threatening.
4. If the child does not answer the register, find other ways of acknowledging his/her presence with a smile, i.e. accepting a nod, shaking hands, let the child put his/her hand up when their name is called.
5. SM children lack social skills and may get overwhelmed in the rough and tumble of the room. Often they stand rigid and find it difficult to get a friend. Try to get him/her to pal up with a quieter child, preferably one at a time. The two might play together with the Wendy House or on a slide. Phase in others when the relationship has been established.
6. Encourage artistic expression through clay, etc. Make sure the SM child has paintings or art-work to take home to show parents and siblings. Also, it might be useful for the SM child to bring their favourite toy from home to the nursery.
7. At story time get the SM child to sit close to the front, occasionally turning to him/her. Observe how the child reacts to (a) funny aspects and (b) sad bits.
8. Introduce play with puppets. These can be useful, particularly if the child is able to talk from behind a screen.

9. Some SM children are particularly good with jigsaws and they then like being praised.
10. Encourage noisy games, musical instruments, etc. i.e. beating the drum and blowing a trumpet.
11. Observe whether the child is willing to go to the toilet at play-school and eat or drink during breaks.
12. Observe posture and facial expression. SM children tend to look unhappy and often do not stand straight.
13. Use techniques as outlined by Victoria Roe (1993) which draw on speech, music and drama therapy. (Further details from SMIRA).
14. Remember that these children must be given time and that changes will come about imperceptively slowly.
15. If, after 6 months in the play-group, the child is still not talking, look around for help.
16. Always remember that the non-speaking may hide other educational or physical problems.

References: Roe V. (1993) An Interactive Therapy Group
Child Language Teaching and Therapy Vol. 9 2 1993 pp. 133-140

Alice Sluckin/SMIRA/1999
For