

Summer Holidays – ways to continue progress

Written by Gail Kervatt M.Ed for the USA-based group SMG-CAN and reproduced here with her kind permission

Summer break conjures up thoughts of lots of “fun”. To most families summer break means fun at the beach and the pool, fun having barbeques with friends, fun visiting Grandma and Grandpa, fun on that special vacation, fun playing with siblings and neighbourhood friends, fun sleeping late!

However, for a selectively mute child, summer break also means a “break” in the school intervention to help the child overcome the anxiety induced mutism. It means a two month break in routine, a two month break in provided services, a two month break in socializing with the teacher and classroom peers within the school setting. The summer break often can result in a regression in progress, in the lowered anxiety in the school setting and in the coping skills that have been practiced during the school year .

Parents can prepare and take some steps early to make sure that progress continues in September from the point where the child left off in June. Here are some suggestions:

- Meet with your school principal in sufficient time to discuss placement for next year. Discuss teacher choice and children with whom your child relates. This is very important and you may have to insist upon your request being granted. You may want to meet with the new teacher and discuss their knowledge, strategies and feelings of having your child in their classroom.
- Once the placement is made, find ways to slowly introduce and acclimatise your child to next year’s teacher. This can be accomplished through the “key worker” who works with your child in a small group and through the classroom teacher. The “key worker” in the school can invite possible teacher choices, one at a time, to the small group setting to play a game with the group. The classroom teacher can invite possible teacher choices into the classroom to participate in group activities and/or reading groups. The classroom teacher can send your child with a friend to deliver notes to the possible teachers.
- Spend some time with your child and a new classmate on the playground and then in the new classroom where he/she will be placed. This can be done after school and during the summer. Ask your child to choose the desk where he/she would like to sit.
- Ask the new teacher to make an effort to communicate with your child during the summer. This can be accomplished with a welcoming note or postcard, a phone message and/or a visit to your home. Take your child to school during August to help the new teacher set up the classroom. There should be no pressure for your child to speak during these encounters.

- As soon as possible, get a list of the new class and arrange play dates often with children of your child's choice. This way your child will enter the new classroom in September knowing there will be a friend or two there with him.
- During the summer break provide opportunities for your child to practice communicating in the "real world" such as at a restaurant, the snack bar at the park, the library or a store. Even if your child can only point to a menu choice or item in a store, continue to expose him/her to these situations. Also, it's important to model appropriate social interactions for your child. You might want to read Angela McHolm's book, *Helping Your Child with Selective Mutism*, which demonstrates how to set up a "communication ladder" and go from there.

Enjoy that summer break, a wonderful time to relax and be together doing fun activities, but continue to help your child to 'rid the silence'.

www.selectivemutism.org.uk