

The Selectively Mute Child in School

The Teacher's Response

As Selective Mutism is relatively rare, many teachers will never have encountered such a child before and may have no idea how to respond. Recognising that Selective Mutism is an anxiety response, similar to a phobia, may help the teacher to better understand the child.

Negative responses by the teacher can include:-

- feeling threatened or frustrated at being unable to elicit a verbal response from the child
- modelling verbal responses, e.g. answering register, 'over-talking' for the child
- denying there is a problem or hoping it will clear up in time without any intervention
- pressuring, bribing, threatening, flattering or cajoling the child into speaking.

Positive responses by the teacher can include:-

- removing the pressure to speak from child
- removing the pressure to make the child speak from yourself
- trying to help the child feel secure and accepted as they are at that time
- working hard to establish a rapport and a good relationship with the child
- accepting any non-verbal responses or attempts to communicate
- linking the SM child with a small group of peers and a key adult
- encouraging social interaction and physical movement through games
- letting the child know that other children and even adults fear speaking at times
- seeking outside help from agencies, e.g. SNTS, EPS, and support groups like SMIRA
- working with the parents to make a 'bridge' between home and school.

The Teacher's role

1. Early identification

- the condition may be manifested in school settings and rooted in the child's anxiety over speaking in unfamiliar social settings and to unfamiliar people
- allow a 'settling in' period, but if the child is still not speaking even to peers after a term, action needs to be taken, because they will not "just grow out of it"
- early treatment produces good results quickly, but a long established pattern of silence is harder to break and needs a highly structured programme

2. Establishing a partnership with the child's parents

- communication, honesty and trust are vitally important in learning about the child
- visiting the child at home can help in transferring speech to the school setting
- parents visiting school with child before entry, especially when the school is empty, can help the child to gain 'ownership' of the building before having to share it
- tape/video of the child speaking at home can be brought to school, if the child agrees
- friends from school visiting to play at home can also help in transferring speech.

3. Effecting Intervention

- assess child's stage of communication, e.g. non-verbal, sounds, single words, phrases
- plan a strategy to move the child on to the next stage
- use Stimulus Fading* ('sliding in') technique, if a conversation partner is available for child
- use Shading technique* if no existing conversation partner is available
- use Interactive Therapy Group games with young children in school

References

Johnson, M. & Wintgens, A. (2001) "The Selective Mutism Resource Manual". *p.117-204
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Roe, V. (1993) 'An Interactive Therapy Group' in "Child Language, Teaching and Therapy"
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