

## An advice sheet for parents, teachers and carers of children who have selective mutism

### WHAT TO SAY WHEN ...

#### ... other people need a quick explanation (do this in private)

"Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder – if we do nothing or treat it like a behaviour problem, the anxiety will get worse."

"No, it's not shyness, more like stage fright. She literally freezes up and can't get a word out at times."

"Selective mutism is a phobia of talking to anyone outside your comfort zone. It's the same as a phobia of cats or eating certain foods – even though there's nothing to be scared of, you just get this awful feeling of panic."

#### ... people make unhelpful comments in front of the child

Step in quickly and play down unhelpful comments and questions as in the following examples. Show that you are not concerned and quickly move on to another topic. If appropriate, arrange to speak to the individuals concerned later, to explain how they can help the child or young person in future.

#### ... adults put pressure on the child to speak

If adults make comments such as:

"Are you going to speak to me today?"

"Has the cat got your tongue?"

"What's the matter – is something wrong?"

Say something like:

"You'll have to wait and see, won't you?!"

(To [N], referring to the comment) "That's a funny thing to say, isn't it?!"

"[N]'s doing really well. We're all very happy with how she's doing."

"Nothing's wrong. [N]'s enjoying listening, aren't you?"

#### ... other children ask why the child who has selective mutism doesn't talk

"[N] will talk as soon as she feels ready, won't you [N]?"

"[N] hasn't found his voice in school yet but, when he does, we won't make a fuss. We'll talk to him as if he's always spoken."

"Some of us find it hard to speak when there are lots of people around. It'll be easier when just the two of you work or play together."

"[N]'s working on it. You can be a good friend and just wait for it to happen."

[N] is the name of the child or young person who has selective mutism

**... other children tell you the child can't talk**

"[N] is really good at talking at home and if we all help by being patient, she'll be able to talk here too, isn't that right [N]?"

"[N] talks lots at home, and he's working hard on talking here too"

"If you're lucky you might be the first person [N] talks to at school. But it won't be you if you keep saying that!"

"Of course she can, but right now you prefer to listen and think, don't you [N]?"

**... other children speak for the child**

If children pass on a message from the child openly accept this to gradually enable [N] to speak to friend(s) in front of you.

"Thank you, I'll check with [N] that I've got the message right."

"Is that right, [N]?" ([N] confirms by nodding or shaking their head.)

(Use friend as a go-between) "Can you ask [N] who he'd like to sit with?"

If children answer for the child, make it clear that you were not talking to them!

"It's OK, [N] knows how to answer. He can point/show me/nod/shake his head."

**... the child puts up their hand in class to answer or is asked a question**

Smile and wait five seconds. If no answer comes, calmly move the conversation on:

"Well done, I can see you know the answer! Who else wants to have a go?"

"That's OK, jot it down/show me later/tell Danny what you were going to say."

"Let [N] have a think about that." (Explain privately that [N]'s not ready for direct questions.)

**... the child speaks for the first time and/or other children comment on this**

Respond to what [N] says as if they have always spoken (ie no direct praise):

"Great idea"; "That sounds fun"; "Yes let's do that"; "Good answer!"

"We always knew [N] would feel like talking one day."

"That's great – and what have you managed to do today?"

**... you cannot hear what the child says**

If you are alone with [N], say you're sorry you didn't hear, rather than ask [N] to repeat or speak up. But don't draw attention to this in public. Thank [N] for the contribution and, if necessary, seek clarification later on a one-to-one basis.

**... people expect the child to say 'Hello', 'Goodbye', 'Please' or 'Thank you'**

Smile and calmly move the conversation on. Social conventions are the hardest thing for children who have SM to accomplish and are not a priority. If appropriate, explain later in private that the child was not being rude.

**Note:** these are just examples which can be adapted for individual children, depending on their age and different situations – you will be able to think of more!  
The last example in each group is generally more suitable for older children.