

PARENT AUTHORED ADVICE

Subject: Planning a Transition to Secondary School

Transition planning is a very important necessity that needs to be given adequate time and thought. A change of school or class needs to be well prepared for, to reduce anxiety levels and to pave the way for progress. The following information will be helpful to parents and professionals who want to plan a smooth transition for a child with Selective Mutism. Due to the different structure of Secondary Education it is important to plan early for the transition, even if it appears that the SM has been overcome, as there is an increased potential for the child's anxiety levels to rise again.

This document is published by SMIRA and is written by a dedicated parent, known to SMIRA, from their own experiences, in the hope that it will be useful to others.

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Transition planning

The importance of Transition Planning

Starting school, changing school or changing classes are significant events for most children, with the huge change potentially causing a lot of worry, but it can be an especially distressing time for those who are affected by anxiety disorders such as Selective Mutism (SM). Many children with SM are generally anxious individuals and may become increasingly worried about every little aspect of their upcoming change of environment due to the feelings of uncertainty; consequently parents may see behavioural changes such as bed wetting, sleep problems, melt downs at home and parents may notice their child speaking less and less as their anxiety increases.

Many children find change difficult but for a child with Selective Mutism a change such as moving schools or class needs to be managed very carefully and efficiently for the following reasons:

- a) To set the foundations for the child to develop their communication skills in an anxiety free environment giving them the opportunity to leave behind their non-speaking associations.
- b) To prevent the loss of momentum (if the child has made progress)
- c) To pave the way for continued progress and to prevent regression
- d) To prevent a negative impact on the child from high anxiety levels caused by stress
- e) To help the child adapt to the new environment and feel confident in their new surroundings paving the way for recovery.

It is very well documented in all of the literature from recent years and the advice is clear that if early identification of Selective Mutism is followed by an appropriate intervention then the majority will overcome their difficulties with the prognosis a lot more promising. If schools promptly adopt good practices, such as implementing strategies recommended by Speech and Language Therapists, Educational Psychologists and parents this can then save many years of anguish for children and their parents, reducing the likelihood of worsening, extended or additional difficulties which consequently present the need for a more prolonged, costly, and time consuming intervention. The organising and implementation of a Transition Plan can act as your first chapter of the appropriate intervention that will help a child to combat their anxieties and find their voice. School staff and parents have very important roles in this process and must work together as a team with other relevant professionals (if involved) to plan a successful transition that will ultimately meet the child's social, emotional and communication needs.

A child at this age is likely to be self-conscious and aware of their own difficulties due to SM. They may have found that their SM is entrenched due to the prior expectations of both staff and peers (eg: staff and peers ask closed questions which the child can simply reply to with nods or shakes) and therefore, young people with SM may see the transition to Secondary School as a "fresh start" where fewer people know them as "the child who doesn't speak". This can be an advantage however it must never be viewed as a failure if their dreams are not realised.

This document sets out guidance as best practice. Strategies can be adopted and then adapted to meet the needs of the child. It is important to realise that as there are so many variables of what level the child is at in the Stages of Confident Speaking and the guidance to be adapted accordingly. The guidance has been written primarily for parents and teaching staff of children of around 9 to 11 years of age. It has been assumed that your LEA follow the system of transferring to Secondary Education at the end of Key Stage 2 (Year 6) and timings may need to be adapted if your LEA is any different.

Choosing a Secondary School

It is important to begin thinking about the child's secondary education as early as possible. Depending on the area you live in, you may have a choice of 2 or 3 schools, or you may be limited to just the 1. Either way, it is advisable to make contact with any prospective schools when the child is in Year 5. Make appointments to speak, either face to face or on the phone with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) of each school. Find out from them what, if any, experience they have of SM and access they have to different external agencies. Ensure that their understanding of SM is in line with your experiences and ask how they can best help your child.

Arrange different times when you and your child can visit the schools (formal Open Days as well as other, informal occasions) to get a feel for each one before making that important decision. Once you have made the decision of which school to apply for, meetings need to be held to plan the transition.

Arrange and prepare for the Transition Meeting

Parents, teachers or other involved professionals can make the first move to arrange a transition meeting. The meeting can be requested in person or by phone but it may be beneficial to ask in writing or by email so to leave a paper trail. All involved individuals (new and current) should be invited to the meeting. This may include the Parents, Teacher, Teaching Assistant, SENCOs of both schools, Pastoral Support worker, Head Teacher, Speech and Language Therapist (SLT), and Educational Psychologist (EP). This will make up the team around the child who will work together to create and implement the plan. There will most likely need to be more than one transition meeting as at the initial meeting there may be information unknown such as which new teacher/s the child will have, and also because the process may need to be reviewed as it progresses.

Parents often play a crucial role in delivering the transition strategies which should usually include a small steps plan, as they are most likely the people that the child feels most confident and at ease with. Recent research concluded that 'Guided Parent' delivered therapies provide an effective treatment for children with anxiety disorders. The findings show that if parents are guided by knowledgeable professionals or by educating themselves with the recommended literature then their input and participation in strategies to help their children is extremely useful and productive. Parents should educate themselves with the help of their SLT, EP or by contacting the Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMiRA) and reading the documents provided, or by reading books such as the Selective Mutism Resource Manual (SMRM). Parents can then recommend their readings to school staff if the staff need help to understand the condition and the

necessary plans that need to be made. It would be helpful to provide this information to the individuals who need it before the meeting so that they can enter the meeting with some level of understanding.

It is advisable to hold a formal meeting soon after the confirmation of a secondary placement and preferably before Easter ready to begin the plan in the Summer Term. Needless to say that arranging the meeting a couple of weeks before the end of the summer term is totally inadequate and will not provide you with the time needed to implement an effective plan.

It may be helpful for parents to take to the meeting, any helpful documents – highlighting relevant parts that will be of help to guiding the team and/or to back up your requests. They could also put together a suggested provisional plan that the team can then work on and finalise together. It will be beneficial for parents to write up a Personalised Guidance doc which outlines exactly how Selective Mutism affects their child and how everybody can help. This will need to be updated regularly.

At The Meeting

- Educate the team:
Hopefully all of the members of the team have been informed about Selective Mutism and the needs of the child prior to the meeting and so have a fair understanding of the difficulties that are faced. However, if this is not the case, first and foremost the members will need to be familiarised with all the important basic information that they need.
- Present the Personalised Guidance document and go through it. Ask if anyone present who knows the child has anything they would like to add, and answer any questions.
- The school staff need to understand that ALL staff must work together to create an anxiety free environment in which the child can thrive. All staff, not just those who will teach the child, must have knowledge of the child's difficulties, what they can do to help, and the plan which is in place. This is particularly difficult in a Secondary School where the staff is so much larger than at Primary School. An SM child needs to know that if they bump into Mr X in the corridor that member of staff will know who they are and not expect a verbal response from them.
- Suggest staff training delivered by a trained professional (or by the parent if confident enough). The DVD 'Silent children' could be shared with the school to educate.
- Discuss different ways of assessing, other than verbally and make sure that the child will be going into subject groups according to their abilities rather than lower ability groups simply because they cannot verbalise their answers.
- Discuss the importance of Transition planning as outlined above if necessary.
- Decide and record when to implement the plan and how often sessions should take place, their aims and their structure.
- Organise a settling in plan for easing into the new class and for creating the anxiety-free environment that the child needs.
- Discuss Small Steps Plan to take place in the new school year to continue progress. Finalise plan for this later, after results have been seen from Transition Plan.
- Discuss who the child's tutor will be (if there is a choice). Look at the options and decide which one will be most suited to the child. Does anyone already have experience of SM?

Who will be the most accommodating to the child's needs? Who is calmer and more softly spoken? Who has the best empathy skills?

- The parent may need to know which tutor group their child will be in and who their tutor will be earlier than the rest of the children so that the plan can be carried out effectively. This may go against the normal practices of the school but it may be necessary to make this reasonable adjustment in order to meet the child's Special Educational Need. If the school have a justifiable reason not to accommodate this request then the plan may need to start a little later.
- Ensure the child will have at least two familiar peers, with whom they are comfortable, in their new Tutor Group.
- Write up meeting minutes. What was agreed, what wasn't and why. Ensure all members have a copy.

The Aims of the plan

1. To help the child adapt to the new environment and feel confident in their new surroundings.
2. To set the foundations for the child to develop their communication skills in an anxiety free environment giving them the opportunity to leave behind their non-speaking associations.
3. To aid progress and prevent regression.
4. For the child to 'own' the school 'space', i.e. for the school to become a safe place where they feel comfortable to participate in activities, express themselves and speak.
5. For the child to speak to the parent in the school setting
6. For the child to speak to classroom based adult/s in the school setting.
7. For the plan to be flexible and adaptable based on the child's needs and progress.
8. For all staff to have a good understanding of Selective Mutism, the effect it has on the child as an individual and for the staff to know how they can help.

The Plan (Last term before moving up)

At the Primary School:

- In preparation for introducing new adults have a regular games session (or whatever the child is interested in) with current TA & a small group of peers. This could start before the Easter break so it is well established.
- Secondary SENCO to visit Primary School & observe child (possibly without the child being aware that they are the focus, to reduce anxiety).
- Secondary SENCO to visit to chat to child informally, reassuring them that they understand, that there will be no pressure to talk, that the teachers won't put the child on the spot to answer questions in front of the class unless they put their hand up etc when they start Secondary School & talk through routines etc (preferably printed out to avoid eye contact) with another adult present whom the child is already comfortable with who may need to act as intermediary during the conversation. These permissions and reassurances will help to

ease the child's speech related anxieties and will contribute towards creating that anxiety free environment.

- When known, Secondary Tutor to visit at primary school. Play games with a small group of peers to break the ice. Ideally several such visits should be planned.

At the Secondary School:

- Each child is different and by the age of 10 or 11 there could be a whole spectrum of the ways in which SM may present itself. It is therefore important to start where the child currently is but allowing for some regression. It is also important to allow the child to have a say as to what they might find helpful. However, be aware that some children will not want to talk about their SM (even with a parent) and therefore this needs to be respected and the child reassured that the adults will try to make the transition as smooth as possible.
- Whole class visits/standard visits. Most schools will give all children the chance to visit their new school a couple of times before they start, usually as a whole class or in a small group as well as evening sessions with parents.
- For some children it is helpful to visit the new school at the end of the day when the other students have gone home. They may like to have a friend accompany them and a parent. Again, depending on the child, several visits might be suitable. Possible ideas for these visits might include:
 1. Have a map of the new school, showing room numbers, toilets, external doors etc. Maybe pick a room and see if the child can lead you there.
 2. Feel comfortable enough to speak to the parent and sibling/friend (enticing speech) with school staff nearby. You can also use graded questioning techniques. Please see further guidance on sliding in, communication load, and graded questioning for more details.
- Make a Transition Book (Social Story). This can contain pictures of the classroom, the toilets, the playground, Support Unit and any other relevant places around the school. It can also contain pictures of the tutor, SENCO, Support Staff as well as the classroom routines. The child could assist in taking the photos as one of the activities in the sessions. (See examples of Social Stories in SMIRA Files)
- The Settling In Plan: This should be planned with the student and work at a pace at which they feel comfortable. Ensure they are only withdrawn from timetabled lessons if that is what they want. Some children may feel it draws more attention to themselves and therefore, find it increases anxiety. Help them to understand that there may be times when they need to come out of their comfort zone, in order to progress, but reassure them that there will be plenty of support. The Settling In Plan may include:
 1. For ALL school staff to follow guidance from the child's Personalised Guidance document.
 2. If deemed appropriate, and with the young person's agreement, for the class to be made aware about the child's difficulties in an age appropriate way, e.g. a letter read out or a video presentation, with or without the child's presence.

3. A buddy system. Children can be paired up to support each other through the day. This may help the child with SM to make a new friend/s and/or to have someone that can support them with tasks that they find difficult to do on their own.
4. Rapport building with keyworker/TA/Teacher/peers during 1:1 time or small group activities.

Suggestions for at home before the change:

- Encourage friendships with other children who will be in your child's classes.
- Talk excitedly about the upcoming transition and act confidently that you believe that all will be fine and that your child will cope well. Ensure you hide any anxieties you may have.
- Practise public transport routines if needed.

The First Few Weeks At the New School

- As a parent/carer try to build a good email relationship with the different staff that your child will have contact with. At Secondary School it is impossible to keep popping in like you might have done at Primary School. Bear in mind, too, that teachers may change part way through the year (eg: technology teachers) and so you may need to begin the contact with them at a later date. You may also need to almost start again the following September with a new timetable of teachers. But each time follow the same principles, emailing and suggesting small steps. With emails you have the advantage of being able to give the same message to several people at once, being able to copy in the Tutor and/or SENCO as well as keeping a paper trail.

A SUGGESTED PHASING-IN PLAN VIA EMAILS:

1. Email each member of staff to explain SM and how it affects your child. Attach any web links that you think may be helpful. Don't assume that the SENCO has passed on all the information you have given them. With the best will in the world things do get forgotten and so direct contact with each teacher is the best way to ensure they have the relevant details at their fingertips. If you copy the SENCO in each time, they will be kept in the loop too. Make sure each teacher knows that SM is not a choice and that by putting pressure on the young person will only make things worse. Reinforce the fact that a child is more likely to be able to speak if they feel relaxed and so relationship building should be priority in the first few weeks of term.
2. Discuss with your child how they will answer the register for each teacher. They may find it easier to phase-in different teachers one at a time. Decide on a possible order for this together (maybe the ones who your child feels most comfortable with, first).

3. Email the teachers to explain what you are planning to do and that you will let them know when it is their turn. That way those towards the end of the list will know what's happening and won't think that things aren't progressing.
4. Email the first teacher to explain HOW you want things to be done and which day you would like them to start. Maybe get them to discreetly speak to the young person as they enter the room and reassure them that if they don't manage to answer it doesn't matter. Ask them to call the register as normal, to give your child about 5 seconds to answer and if they don't manage it, just to move on. Stress, too, that if the young person does manage it, still just move on, don't draw attention to it!
5. As your child manages to answer the register for each teacher, email the next one on the list for the next day. If it helps the child to see their progress, keep a list at home that they can tick off. Hopefully each success will motivate them for the next.
6. When your child is feeling comfortable with a teacher, contact the teacher again, to suggest the next step, each time getting them to discreetly give your child notice of what they will do and reassurance that it's ok if they don't manage that step at this particular time. Start by getting the teacher to ask yes/no questions, then one word factual answers working through the Stages of Confident Speaking (SMIRA document).

Ensure that throughout this process the teachers remember these points:

- Always try to speak to the SM child discreetly, without drawing attention to them, either after the lesson or whilst others are working.
- It is easier to be looking at a piece of work together as there is then less eye contact.
- Group work can be difficult for a child with SM. Some may find it hard to even choose someone else to work with as they do not want to impose themselves on others.
- Alternative assessments will need to be looked at especially for Languages and English Orals. It may need some creative thinking such as making a video at home, a telephone conversation, an audio recording or simply another teacher who the child is already comfortable enough to speak to. An exemption can be applied for if there seems to be no other way. (See SMIRA document – Guidance for Special Arrangements & Exam Exemption)
- Relationship is the key; if the young person feels comfortable with a particular adult, speaking will be easier for them. It is not a staffroom competition to see who can get your child to speak first!
- Any change needs to be implemented by using small steps. If one step does not work, going back to the previous level where the child was comfortable and think about how the next step can be broken down even smaller.

Appendix

References

Research paper: Treatment of child anxiety disorders via guided parent-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy: randomised controlled trial.

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens.

Helping your child with Selective Mutism by Angela E McHolm et al.

Bibliography

- Transition Plans document SMiRA – Maggie Johnson
- Selective Mutism: How to manage a transition to a new class by Lucy Nathanson

Further Reading

All documents mentioned can be found on the SMiRA website and/or the SMiRA Facebook group files section unless otherwise stated.

- The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens
- Helping Your Child with Selective Mutism by Angela E McHolm et al.

Documents from SMiRA sources (Facebook group or website)

- Transition Plans document (also contains some information for older children)
- The Confident Children website's information on transition planning by Lucy Nathanson.
- Dos and Don'ts at Secondary School by Maggie Johnson
- Stages of Confident Speaking by Maggie Johnson
- Choosing a School
- Creating the right environment
- Victoria Roe Research
- Older Children and Teens by Ricki Blau