

Playdates

(For younger children – under 9 approximately)

If your child is affected by Selective Mutism, arranging regular playdates for them will be extremely helpful. By arranging playdates for your child you are providing them with opportunities to speak to peers in an environment where they feel at ease, and the playdates will help with the development of those all important social skills. If your child is struggling to form friendships with peers at pre-school or school, playdates will give them the opportunity to form those bonds in an environment where they feel more comfortable with speaking. By creating these opportunities at home – a 'safe space', and in other low anxiety 'spaces', you are providing your child with chances to practice speaking to classmates, chances that are not available at school due to feelings of anxiety. Over time, with practice your child will gain more and more confidence with speaking as anxiety levels reduce, and that confidence is likely to make the transfer of speech to the school environment easier. However, don't hold expectations that as soon as your child starts speaking to friends at home, your child will instantly start speaking at school – These are different spaces – meaning different anxiety levels – different challenges. Try to view the success of your child speaking outside of school with their friends as a very positive step, one which will be very beneficial to your child and should accelerate progress. For parents looking for practical ways to help their children, arranging playdates is a good place to start.

Deciding which children to ask

- Find out which children your child likes to play with at school. It may be that your child know exactly who they would like to invite, but if they are very young or unsure you will need to investigate a little...
- Firstly speak to your child casually about their school day. Who do they like to play with? Who do they like? Secondly, speak to school or pre-school staff. What have they observed? Who has your child been interacting with nicely?
- Once you have identified a few candidates you need to decide who to invite first. Who is your child most comfortable with? Have they spoken to any of those children before? Even if only in a whisper? If so, maybe that child could be a good child to start with.
- Before any child is invited round to play you must ensure that it is what and who your child wants. Talk to your child about it. To invite a classmate round to play without your child's blessing is not the way forward and runs the risk of adding to their anxieties.
- You will need to have regular playdates with the chosen child as frequently as can be arranged.

- The idea is that once your child can speak confidently with one child you can then introduce another. Do not introduce lots of friends at once as this may overwhelm your child. One child at a time – little steps.
- Once your child can speak confidently with a few friends, you could allow your child to start inviting two friends at once. This will give your child the opportunity to practice speaking in small groups.

Organise the playdate

- If you know the parents of the selected child then this step is simple and straight forward. If you don't know the parents seize an opportunity in the playground to approach them and ask. By going to the parents directly and attempting to build a good rapport with them (or friendship – even better) you will find that arranging future playdates is an easier task. It will also give you the opportunity to tell the parents about SM and raise a little awareness. This will help them understand your situation and will explain the need for the level of frequency. Additionally these parents may be able to provide you with support in future if a good relationship is forged.
- However if you are anxious yourself and feel uncomfortable asking other parents directly, you could choose one of the following options:
 - Give a written invitation to the parents.
 - Ask the school staff to pass on the invitation on for you.
 - If your child is confident non-verbally and is happy to approach people, maybe they would like to pass on the invitation.
 - Ask school staff to ask the parents for you.

Important considerations when planning

- You may find that your child can speak to anyone in the comfort of their own home, but it is not that straightforward for all children. Many selectively mute children fall silent when a visitor enters their home, especially if that visitor is associated with school. If this is the case for your child then you may like to take note of the following considerations:
 - Unless your child prefers their own space be actively involved. This will give your child the opportunity to speak to you in front of their friend, which will be one step towards speaking directly to them.
 - You may need to be quite heavily involved in the activities to begin with, dependant on your child's anxiety levels. Until your child feels comfortable enough to speak it

will be down to you to make sure that both children are enjoying themselves and that the interaction is comfortable.

- If you find that your child struggles to speak to classmates in your home, it may be an idea to not bring the friend straight home from school with you – at least in the beginning to prevent the muteness coming home with them.

Planning – Location

- Start off in a location in your home where your child likes to spend time and is most at ease. Set the location variable to minimum anxiety.
- As playdates progress, move to other areas of your home until your child can speak confidently with their friend throughout your home.
- Once your home is conquered you can start to have playdates with the selected child out in the community. Choose a familiar place where your child is at ease – perhaps in a park or a favourite café, or maybe at another family member's house if your child will find that easier.
- Some children may actually find it easier to speak to their friend outside of the home. If this is the case for your child then by all means start having the playdates outside to begin with – maybe at the park or in the garden. Go with whatever your child finds most comfortable.
- You may find that your child receives invitations to play at friends' homes. When they are ready for this you can always accompany them to begin with.
- A more challenging step for later on may be to visit the school grounds out of hours with your child and the selected friend – if the school allows. This could be extremely helpful in that it may aid the transfer of speech to the school environment.

Planning – Activities

- To begin with choose familiar favourite activities that your child enjoys and feels relaxed when participating in.
- Think about what type of activities your child enjoys the most. Physical activities? Board games? Playing with toys? Arts and crafts?
- Make sure that the activities chosen are developmentally appropriate.
- Consider the amount of speaking that is required with the activities:

- First: Start off with activities that give an opportunity to speak rather than activities where there is an expectation to speak, such as arts and crafts, or playing with small toys in role.
- Second: Introduce activities with low speaking demands, such as a favourite simple board or card game, e.g. Snap, or Go Fish. When your child is ready a game of 'Eye Spy' can work well, with your child doing the spying, so that only 'yes' or 'no' answers are required. A great favourite is the Pick a Sweet game where children can pick a sweet by stating the colour.
- Third: Move onto activities with medium speaking demands which use either scripted language or predictable language - where only factual speech is required. Examples include: reading a favourite book (scripted), or a naming pictures game (factual). A game of Battleships or Guess Who are ideal games to play at this level. *Re. reading aloud; If your child is a particularly confident and fluent reader, reading aloud can be classed a low speaking demand activity.
- Fourth: Progress onto activities which have high speaking demands with more open questions or the sharing of opinions. E.g. The Favourites Game, where both children can take it in turns to ask "What is your favourite...?" The game can be made trickier by adding the question "Why?" The children are consequently encouraged to discuss their likes and interests. If your child wants to, playing Schools may be a helpful game to play at this level.
- Puppets shows can be a very good activity to introduce. Your child could work from a script or improvise, and s/he can put on different voices which some children find easier than speaking in their usual speaking voice.

Encouraging speaking – For children who find speaking on playdates difficult.

- Try to gently prompt your child to speak to you in front of their friend. Giving your child the opportunities to practice speaking in their friend's presence will help to prepare your child for speaking directly to them.
- You may find that your child cannot even speak to you in the presence of their classmate. If this is the case then it is likely that you will need to work on making sure that your child feels comfortable enough to speak to you first.
- You can do this by working through the different levels of communication, starting with the easiest which is commenting:
- **Commenting:** Comment on what your child is doing without asking questions. Compliment your child and their friend's accomplishments. Aid conversation and aim to make both children feel as comfortable as possible, to ensure they are enjoying their time together.
- One idea is to begin comments with "I wonder..." which may prompt an answer – but with no pressure.

- **Ask 'forced alternative' questions:** Children with Selective Mutism often find questions with a choice of two answers easier, because only one or two words need to be repeated, meaning not too much thought is needed for the response.
- If by answering the question there is an indirect reward this may help motivate your child
- When your child answers the question follow on that question with another 'forced alternative' question that leads on from the last. For example, "Would you like an apple, or some crisps?" *Crisps*. "Would you like Walkers or Pringles?" *Walkers*. "Would you like cheese and onion or salt and vinegar?" *Cheese and onion*.
- **Ask open questions:** Once your child is confident answering closed questions you can move onto open questions. Start off with easier open question which are factual before you move onto trickier questions that require an opinion or a lot of thought.
- If your child wants to tell you something but is not comfortable to in front of the friend, you could gently encourage them to tell you in the next room. Then gradually move closer to the friend whilst keeping the conversation going, and/or each time you need to go into another room slowly reduce the distance from the friend. You can use 'forced alternative' questions in the process.
- If your child is very young you could try lifting them up and talking to them in your arms whilst you move very gradually closer to their friend. Your child may feel safer with you holding them and so may be more likely to speak.

General advice regarding playdates

- Always remember that the key is to take it slowly at your child's pace – little steps. Don't move onto the next step, i.e. don't change a variable (people, place, location), until your child can accomplish the current step and speak in an audible voice.
- If your child finds a step too difficult, insert an intermittent step for your child to accomplish. This will involve changing a variable to make the step slightly easier – a half-way house between the last step and the current step. It's always helpful to have a plan B ready.
- Some children may need a 'warm' up period for quite a while, but over time the duration of the 'warm up' periods, and the frequency of them will decrease, until it is phased out completely.
- You may find that progress is a little up and down in the beginning. There could be many reasons for this; not a high enough frequency of playdates, your child's mood, how tired they are, what sort of day they have had. It may help to keep a diary of your child's progress so that you can identify any patterns which may help you to plan playdates more effectively and increase progress. Don't give up! Give it time. It can take a lot of practice.

References:

M. Johnson and A Wintgens. 2001. The Selective Mutism Resource Manual. Speechmark Publishing Ltd.

A.E. McHolm, C.E. Cunningham and M.K. Vanier. 2005. Helping Your Child with Selective Mutism. New Harbinger Publications.