

School Tips for Teachers of Children with Selective Mutism

A Letter to Educational Professionals

Dear teachers and school staff,

You are receiving this letter because you have a child in your class/school who has difficulties speaking in social settings, likely in your class/ school. S/he has selective mutism – a childhood anxiety disorder which although highly treatable can really get in the way of a child’s life in important areas of development. Children with selective mutism talk normally in settings where they feel comfortable, like at home. But in other places, such as school and in the community they can’t speak due to this anxiety. The following strategies can encourage speech in reluctant speakers and children with selective mutism. If the child in your class is working with a therapist, S/he can also help you use these skills in a comprehensive plan to encourage brave talking.

Step 1: The first thing you can do to decrease anxiety in a child with selective mutism is to first **remove all direct pressure to speak**. This helps create a warm, trusting relationship with the child. Try not to ask the child any questions at all. Instead, connect with the child by describing and commenting on things you observe. Make comments that don’t require a response. For example, “What a fantastic shirt with the dog on it! I love dogs.” Using humour can be a great way of connecting and decreasing anxiety. This way, they will not develop history of you asking questions them not answering – which makes speaking even harder later on.

Step 2: When the child looks comfortable, ask **forced-choice questions** (“Do you want the pink paper or the blue paper”). These questions are the easiest and least anxiety provoking to answer. **Open-ended questions** are good too, but a little harder, and can be tried a little later on, (e.g., “what colour paper do you want?”). Try not to ask any yes/no questions. Although tempting, these kinds of questions encourage non-verbal responding (e.g., head nodding), which we are trying to avoid. Try for a verbal response as often as you can.

Step 3: Please **wait 5 seconds** for a response. This might feel like a really long time. However, kids who feel this much anxiety about

speaking might take longer to answer a question because it takes them longer to come up with an answer. They have also learned that if they wait long enough people will also feel uncomfortable and move on. We want them to see that we do expect an answer and are prepared to wait while being supportive.

If you wait a full five seconds and still don't get a response, you can repeat the question or state it a different way (e.g., instead of open-ended try forced-choice.) Try not to guess what the child wants. We really want the child to learn that they need to tell people their needs and desires.

Step 4: When a child answers your questions, **repeat** back what you heard them say in a statement (not question) form. This will ensure other people around hear what the child has said and thus reinforces the experience of being heard.

Step 5: Provide very **specific praise** for talking. Let them know exactly what you like about what they did. This will make it more likely that they will do it again! For example, if the child answers "Blue" then respond by saying, "Blue. Thank you for telling me that" or "Great brave talking."

Other things to keep in mind:

- As children are practicing speaking please allow for certain accommodations which will help them get their basic needs met without reinforcing a pattern of asking a question and getting a nonverbal response. Allow these children to use the bathroom or get water with a predetermined signal (e.g., a card they had you).
- Children with selective mutism might whisper responses when they get more comfortable speaking in a new situation. If you heard what they said, regardless of how quiet, repeat what they said in statement form. Don't worry about the volume, it will come in time.
- Remember selective mutism is an anxiety disorder, which will get better with practice. Stay positive while the child acts brave and fights their fears with your support!