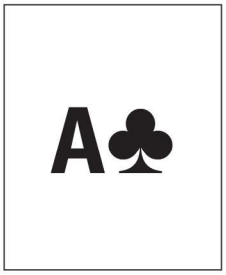
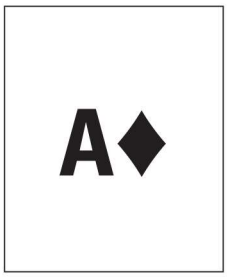
Advice sheet for staff and parents of children who have selective mutism

TALKING TO THE CHILD ABOUT SPEECH ANXIETY – 'THE PEP TALK'



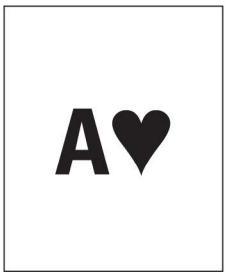
Acknowledge the child's fear of speaking.

Let them know that you understand their difficulty and the feelings they experience when they try to speak. You know they want to and have tried to speak, but they feel so worried about talking that they tighten up and feel frozen – the words seem to get stuck in their throat. The language you use and the detail you give will depend on their age, but even very young children benefit from having their problem acknowledged rather than ignored, 'hushed-up' or misinterpreted.

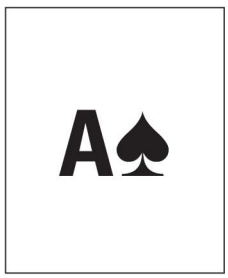


Let the child know they are not alone.

Younger children need to know that there are plenty of other lovely children who find talking hard at first. For older children (just as for adults) it can be especially reassuring to be told that their condition has a name (selective mutism) and that other children their age have got through it. A calm, informed approach will inspire confidence!



Take the pressure off talking so that the child can relax, participate, enjoy and learn in all settings. Emphasise that there are lots of other ways to join in and have fun. Impress on the child that the most important thing is for them to be happy and relaxed. Tell the child that there is no rush and they can speak when they feel ready. Let them know that they have a friend in you to turn to, if they are feeling upset.



Explain that talking will get easier.

It is essential that the child sees themselves as a person who will talk at some time in the future and knows that you have confidence in them. Tell them you know they are not ready to talk yet but it will not always be like this; it will get easier and they will get braver. Emphasise that they only have to do things they can manage; and that by starting with things they find easy, they will gradually be able to do more and more until, one day, talking is really easy too. Even children as young as three years old can see the logic of this approach.

An advice sheet for staff and parents of children who have selective mutism

FIRM FOUNDATIONS: BUILDING CONFIDENCE, COURAGE & SELF-ESTEEM

★ Focus on what children *can* do rather than can't. Foster their individual skills, talents and interests so that they have plenty to feel good about. Ask children to show you and others how to play an instrument, care for their pets, use technology, contribute to a magazine – anything that shows you value them as a whole person and that there's more to life than talking.

★ Physical exercise is good for mind, body and soul and helps to keep anxiety at bay. Start each day with a plan that includes physical activity – whether this is letting off steam after school for younger children, or sweeping up leaves, Tai Chi or walking the dog for older children. Build family outings and school trips around physical challenges which can do so much to boost children's confidence while proving that it is possible to conquer fears through sheer determination.

★ It's *achievement* that builds confidence rather than praise; confidence then enables us to *accept* praise. Under-confident children are therefore often uncomfortable with praise, but need frequent acknowledgement that they are doing well to build self-esteem, persistence and motivation. So ensure success by setting realistic targets and structuring or adapting tasks to the child's capabilities; then smile and *describe* what the child has achieved.

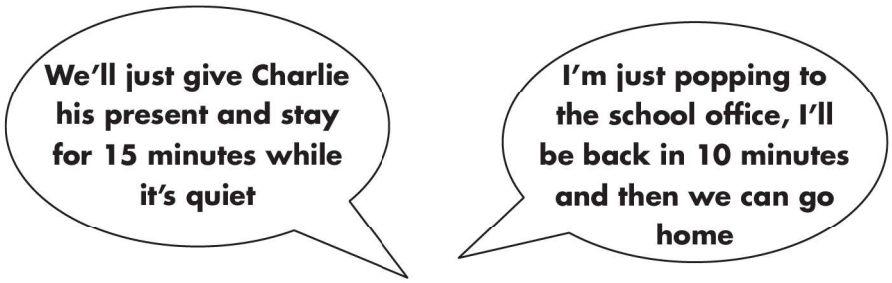
★ Children with SM become acutely aware that they are different to other children and do not want this emphasised, so unless children are very young, acknowledge their achievements around talking and being brave in *private*, rather than in public. In contrast, make sure they receive plenty of praise in public for behaviour that is encouraged and valued in *all* children.

★ Recognise courage or bravery when children do something they initially resist, and reward appropriately with a hug, sticker, special treat, congratulations or verbal acknowledgement. There is a danger of ignoring or dismissing bravery if it seems that the child was being ridiculous to worry in the first place, especially if the situation leaves adults feeling irritated or guilty rather than sympathetic. However, it is important to replace the child's panic, resentment, exhaustion or residual anxiety with pleasant feelings as soon as possible. This is how children learn the name for courage and become less resistant next time; they have a right to feel proud of themselves when they are brave.

★ Resist the urge to do things for children when they look anxious or hesitant, e.g. stepping in to take something that has been offered to your child. If it's only anxiety that's stopping them, this anxiety will not subside if you allow them to rely on you. Give a clear message that they are capable in the form of *permission*, e.g. "It's OK to take the present from Robert", rather than a direct command, e.g. "Go on, take the present". Then smile and *wait* (at least 5 seconds). If this does not work, *make the task easier*, "Tell you what, hold your hands out and see if you can catch it!", "I'll help you hold your hands out and then Robert can give it to you". Do not step in unless you do it *with* the child, "Let's take the present from Robert together, are you ready, 1-2-3…!". Be ready to say "You did well!" as soon as they take up the challenge.

★ Check your behaviour to see if stepping in has become a habit. If you don't know how to make a task more manageable, give yourself some thinking time by gently moving on rather than doing the task yourself. "Come back to Jess later and she can try again"; "That's OK, leave it for now". The less you do, the more children will see you believe in them, and the braver they'll become.

★ Stick to your word so children know they can trust you to move at their pace – and be ready to be lead by them as they gain confidence and want to do more!



★ It's important for children to view difficult tasks as challenges to work towards, rather than insurmountable obstacles. Convert 'can't' to 'can't yet' and assure children they will succeed with more practice / as they get braver / when it's broken down into tiny steps.

★ Children will only take risks and push the boundaries if they are not afraid to make mistakes. Acknowledge and reward effort rather than perfection and view mistakes as proof of endeavour and learning, rather than opportunities for adults to correct or children to give up.

★ Show children how to laugh, relax and have fun. It is important for everyone to enjoy mealtimes, gardening, craftwork and play without worrying excessively about germs or mess, so put away the wet-wipes until the end of the activity! Fears of getting dirty or putting something in the wrong place make it hard to settle in unfamiliar environments, mix with other children and take the initiative.

★ If children are worrying about their parents, they cannot focus on their own well-being. If a child has good reason to be concerned about a parent's behaviour or lifestyle, it is time to reflect on changes the adult would like to make, before investigating local resources or talking to a friend or GP about accessing parental support.

★ Most children who have SM are unable to initiate contact with other children so actively cultivate friendships by pairing them up with other children for play activities and project work.

- ★ Ensure inclusion in all activities and welcome participation at any level while the child works towards talking, e.g. gesture, writing, drawing, making choices, scoring, recording information, checking and handling equipment.
- ★ Often it is anxiety about only one component that creates avoidance, e.g. opting out of a school trip because you don't know if there'll be a toilet-stop en route; being afraid to use school toilets because of the sound of the hand-dryer; not going abroad because you don't know how to get a passport. Show children how to be a positive problem-solver by visualising big intangible worries as smaller components on post-it notes, a mind-map or list. It's then much easier to see which part is causing most anxiety and how it can be addressed.
- ★ Show by your own example how you don't let anxiety stop you doing things that at first seem frightening or overwhelming. Tell children about times you felt worried and considered backing out, but faced your fear and gave it a go or found a solution.

An advice sheet for parents, teachers and carers

HELPING CHILDREN TO COPE WITH ANXIETY

How to make anxious children *more* anxious …

1 Tell them there's nothing to worry about.

2 Sort out their problems.

3 Don't allow them to become distressed.

4 Rush to comfort them.

5 Let them decide what they can cope with.

6 Ask if they are going to be OK.

7 Answer all of their questions.

8 Spring the dreaded event on them at the last minute so there's less time to worry.

Did that list surprise you? No one wants to see their child in distress. So, of course, you want to take away your child's anxiety.

However, anxiety is *normal* and it is *good* for us – it keeps us safe!

Anxiety makes sure that we look out for danger and are prepared to meet life's challenges. When children are shown that the only way to cope with anxiety is to eliminate it, they become increasingly intolerant of anxiety. They only have to feel the tiniest bit anxious and it's unbearable – they feel compelled to run (FLIGHT) or resist (FIGHT) and may seize up or go into denial (FREEZE).

There is another way. Parents can help children FACE their anxiety, understand it, work with it and overcome it!

Things to do differently to make anxious children *less* anxious

1 Anxious children can't help worrying. Telling them there's nothing to worry about makes the worry more confusing, elusive and overwhelming. Children need help to understand that it is *worry* (a product of their excellent imagination!) that is making their body produce the sensations of panic, rather than the situation they fear: "You feel worried because you've never done this on your own before", "You're not sure what will happen when I go downstairs", "It feels scary right now but, after a while, you'll see that nothing bad happens, and your worry will go away and stop bothering you". By labelling and recognising 'Worry', children learn that it's a normal response that they can talk to and control; it's not a stop sign that has to be obeyed. So, rather than dismissing

worries, let children know how amazing they are every time Worry appears and they are brave enough to ride it out. They'll be surprised how quickly it gives up and goes away!

2 When children are tiny, of course they need their carers to fix any problems so that they are safe, well and happy. But even two year olds are actively problem solving throughout the day as they discover how to stop food falling off their spoon and retrieve objects that are out of reach. Independence develops through experimenting, finding your own solutions and enjoying the knowledge that you can be self-reliant. It thrives on a flexible approach to life where there are many ways to do the same thing; there is no need to be perfect; and you can take pride in *effort* as well as achievement. When parents do all of the fixing for anxious children by providing comfort, removing sources of stress or doing things for them to prevent failure, the children become more dependent, less willing to take risks and increasingly passive in their parent's presence. Just recognising that you have fallen into any of these patterns of behaviour, and knowing that it was in response to your child's anxiety, not the cause of it, is the most important step towards turning things around.

3 If we allow children to avoid everything they're afraid of, they will never learn the difference between a *real* threat and an imagined threat. Acknowledge how brave children are being and help them face that fear, one tiny step at a time. Maybe they only need to attend the party for the first ten minutes or watch you having your dental examination, but *not* going to the party or to the dentist's should never be an option.

4 We comfort young children when they are in pain and convey the message 'Stinging nettles, broken glass and fights are *bad* things that you need to avoid if you want to save yourself further pain; meanwhile, I will make you feel better'. If we cuddle and soothe children when they are afraid of insects, dogs or fireworks, for example, the message is the same: 'These are BAD things to be avoided and you should run to me for comfort'. So, ACKNOWLEDGE their anxiety; REASSURE; FACE the fear and PRAISE them. "Of course you're worried, you weren't expecting that but it can't hurt you. Let's stand further back until you get used to it". Save the cuddles for when you congratulate them for being so brave!

5 Anxious children will be convinced they cannot face certain events. By agreeing to their terms – no parties, no visits, no falling asleep alone in their own bed – we deprive them of the opportunity to discover that anxiety can be managed and things are not as difficult as they expect. Consequently, all new challenges will be scary and they will make increasing demands to avoid any anxiety-provoking situation. It is frightening for children to have this much control; they need *adults* to make the big decisions about what is a real threat and what is safe. Adults should, in turn, be guided by the child regarding how *much* they can face at a time, steering them towards gradual mastery of feared situations. By making activities simpler or shorter, providing a distraction or phasing out support, realistic expectations can be set and children can be assured that all they need is the courage to have a go. It may also take courage for their parent to step back and let it happen.

6 "Will you be OK now?" Asking children this question before leaving them tells the child they are right to worry – after all, even you, the adult, are not sure that they'll be OK! *Tell* children they will be OK, let them know when you will be back, and do your very best

not to be late. When you return, stay a while to share an activity and, on your way home, talk about the fun you had, rather than the terrible time they had without you.

7 Anxious children try to eliminate uncertainty by asking their parents endless questions about upcoming events. Answering each one conveys the message that the only way to deal with anxiety is to have a completely accurate forecast for the future – an impossible task. Having *no* idea of what's coming up is horribly unsettling at best and utterly terrifying at worst. So children certainly need a broad outline of their daily schedule and important events in their calendar. They need explanations or role play of routine procedures to know what to expect. But beyond that, as long as children have a clear understanding of what is required from them to complete specific assignments, they need to discover that the finer detail can wait and, more importantly, that they can cope with *not knowing*. Differentiate between need-to-know questions that require an answer and 'worry' questions. Try to answer 'worry' questions with another question, so children can explore the reasons for their anxiety and test how they would cope in each situation.

For example:

"I'm not sure how many people will be there. Why would you like to know? How many do you think you could cope with? So what could you do if there are more than that? What would make it easier?"

"She might have a dog. What worries you most about dogs? How can we tell if it's safe to go near a dog? What do you think dogs want when they jump up? What would make you feel better if a dog was around? So what should we ask Auntie Sue to do?"

Above all, show children by your own example that it's natural to worry about new situations but you can be brave and give it a go anyway. You can show Worry who's in charge!

8 After seeing anxiety, repetitive questioning and resistance grow on the approach to dreaded events, it is completely understandable to forgo advance warning to save children getting themselves into a state. On the surface, this seems to be a good strategy because children often appear to cope reasonably well when there is no way out of a situation. However, this 'success' is usually a feat of endurance, spurred on by sheer adrenalin, rather than an enjoyable experience. The child is left, not with a sense of achievement, but with feelings of resentment, dread and insecurity. They become increasingly wary and suspicious, knowing that the next surprise could be just around the corner. Working through anticipatory anxiety to prepare for a specific event takes a lot more energy and resolve, but provides the foundation for general anxiety-coping strategies. Children learn that anxiety is normal; it can be spoken to with calming and rational thoughts, and overcome with familiarisation, a back-up plan and courage!

Further reading

- ★ *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside (2011), Hodder Children's Books (age 3–9).
- ★ *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety* by Dawn Heubner (2005), Magination Press (age 6–12).
- ★ *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents* by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons (2013), Health Communications, Inc. (age 8–18).
- ★ *First Steps Out Of Anxiety* by Dr Kate Middleton (2010), Lion Books, Oxford (young people and adults).

An advice sheet for parents, carers and teachers of children who worry

MISTAEKS HAPPEN . . .!

Being afraid to make mistakes can hold us back in all walks of life. It's particularly hard on anxious children and young people who are desperate to get it right first time. The following tips may help them learn that mistakes are an inevitable and important part of life – they can even be fun!

Create a culture where mistakes are expected rather than penalised

★ Talk positively about mistakes when they occur. They show that children are having a go, trying hard and giving themselves and others the opportunity to learn. The only way you find out what works is to rule out the things that *don't* work, and the only way you get better at anything is to practise. Mistakes are the most important thing that happen in any classroom, leisure or sporting activity, because they tell you where to focus that practice.

★ When children are reluctant to write because they fear their work will be returned with any mistakes marked in red pen.

  – Add comments on sticky notes which can be studied, moved around and removed later.

  – Try the 'two stars and a wish' approach for group, self and individual evaluation. Say two things you like about the piece of work and one thing that could be improved to make it even better.

★ Introduce correction policies (simple written rules) for perfectionist children who can't bear to make mistakes. So it's not '*If* you make a mistake . . .' but '*When* you make a mistake, you need to . . .'. This gives children something definite to *do*, rather than simply telling them *not* to throw their work in the bin or give up.

★ Do an internet search for someone your child admires for their accomplishments; for example, a footballer, a musician, an author or a game designer. The chances are that you will find something about how it took them a long time to get it right! Or look for inspiring quotes like this one, which is attributed to Thomas Edison, who invented the light bulb and much more: 'I have not failed. I've just found ten thousand ways that won't work.'

Be a role model

★ Be good-humoured about your own mistakes – the kind that cause no harm – and show that they are nothing to feel bad about. You simply put things right, keep trying or leave things until later to sort out.

- ★ Always state what you have learned from your mistakes, eg 'At least I know to put the lid on firmly next time!'; 'I'm definitely getting better at this'.
- ★ Resist the temptation to swoop in and fix children's handiwork to make it perfect – celebrate their efforts, creativity and personal achievements. Once you change a child's masterpiece, it's yours not theirs and they may be less willing to share with you next time.
- ★ Demonstrate that it's fine to say 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure' – it's OK not to know the answer, and cool to try to find it.

MISTAKES ARE PROOF THAT YOU ARE **TRYING**

- ★ Get children you know well laughing with this game. Take it in turns to pick an activity out of a hat (eg 'Clean your teeth', 'Go upstairs') and do it in the most daft, silly way possible – you can mime, but doing it for real is funnier!

A different attitude to guessing

- ★ Encourage children to guess by stressing that all of their guesses are acceptable. Guesses demonstrate *good thinking*; it's not about 'right' and 'wrong' answers.
- ★ Practise guessing in the safe structure of guessing games such as Guess Who? (which can be adapted using the children's names), Twenty Questions, Hangman, I-Spy and What Am I? Children are usually more inclined to guess if they are given so many 'lives' to use up.

- ★ Teach the process of good guessing for when you don't know the answer – this is vital for multiple-choice questions. First, eliminate the answers that are *definitely* wrong. If one of the remaining answers seems more likely than the others, or you just get a *feeling* about it, choose that one. But think about it for only ten seconds. If nothing is obvious, decide a rule beforehand and make that choice as quickly as possible; for example, always go for 'the third option' or 'the longest answer'. Done!

Further reading

- ★ *Beautiful Oops!* by Barney Saltzberg (2010), Workman Publishing Company (ages 3–adult).
- ★ *The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes* by Mark Pett (2011), Sourcebooks Jabberwocky (ages 4–8).
- ★ *Mistakes That Worked: 40 Familiar Inventions and How They Came to Be* by Charlotte Foltz ones (2013), Doubleday Books for Young Readers (ages 8–12).
- ★ *Helping Your Child Overcome Perfectionism*, Anxiety BC resources, online, www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/OvercomingPerfectionism.pdf.
- ★ *Active Listening for Active Learning (Good Thinking)* by Maggie Johnson and Carolyn Player (2009), QEd Publications.

An advice sheet for parents, carers and teachers

ENSURING AN ANXIETY-FREE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE SELECTIVE MUTISM

PLEASE DO:

- ★ Recognise that selective mutism is an anxiety disorder; a phobia of talking which can only be overcome by allowing children to take small steps forward, in a controlled way, at their own pace. By removing speech anxiety in everyday situations, you will enable them to benefit fully from an intervention programme.
- ★ Remember that this is a genuine difficulty and any pressure to speak will make things worse. Have patience and let the child speak when they are ready.
- ★ Engage the child through physical activity, craftwork, creative projects and fun.
- ★ Talk to the child about what you are doing without expecting an answer. Make comments rather than asking direct questions, eg 'This looks like your dog, I can't remember his name though', rather than 'What's the name of your dog?'
- ★ Provide the *opportunity* to speak rather than making demands, eg 'Hmm, I wonder where this one goes?' (pause); 'Oh dear, I can't find any round ones' (pause).
- ★ Warmly respond to the child's attempts to communicate through gesture or whispering, by talking back in a natural way as if they had spoken.
- ★ Ask the child questions through other adults or children they talk to, keeping a comfortable distance until the child can talk easily in front of you.
- ★ Reassure the child in private that you won't single them out in class to answer a question, read aloud or demonstrate an activity unless they let you know that *they want to be chosen*. Say that they can start talking as soon as they feel ready but, until then, just have a good time! It's OK to laugh and it's OK to sing – whatever they feel they can manage.
- ★ Invite the child to let you know if anything is upsetting them, or if they have news they want to share, through a two-way liaison book with home.
- ★ Assist transitions between home and other settings: eg parents participate with the child in other settings; staff or friends visit the child's home.
- ★ Try to find time at school for periods of unpressured one-to-one interaction.
- ★ Encourage the child to sit, work or play with friends they talk to in other settings.
- ★ Organise activities in which children move, sing or talk *in unison*, and activities and games which do not require speech, making this clear before you start.

PLEASE DO:

- ★ Include the child in other activities by offering alternative forms of communication as a temporary stepping-stone while the child is having difficulty speaking; for example, pointing, holding up a picture, writing, or recording their news at home.
- ★ Provide opportunities to talk in situations that are less threatening to the child. For example: 'Can you take [new child] to the pegs and show her where to put her bag?'; 'Take Mummy to the hall and show her what we've been making for assembly'; 'Please help [less able child] tidy up. He's not sure what he's got to do.'
- ★ Actively support friendships with other children, making sure that peers don't pressurise the child to speak and understand that they will speak in their own time.
- ★ Use puppets, masks, voice-activated toys, recorded messages, talking tubes and walkie-talkies, which may be easier for the child than direct talking.
- ★ Ensure that the child can access the toilet, meals, drinks, help and first aid without speaking. Agree a procedure to follow when they feel ill or upset.
- ★ Let children sit at the back or side of the classroom so that they have a good vantage point.
- ★ At registration, allow hands-up, involve the whole class in a social activity, or ask 'Is [each child's name] here?', so that the class members look around and answer in unison.
- ★ Let the child know how well they are doing by noticing them being helpful, kind, thoughtful, hard-working, good-humoured, brave and creative.
- ★ Encourage independence and ensure success. Rather than doing things *for* the child, do things *with* them initially and then withdraw, or make things *easier*.
- ★ Have the same expectations for good behaviour as for any other child.

PLEASE DO NOT:

- ★ Be hurt or offended when the child remains silent.
- ★ Confuse a fixed facial expression with glaring, defiance, being uninterested or smirking.
- ★ Beg, bribe, persuade or challenge the child to speak, or make it your mission to get them to talk.
- ★ Make the child say 'Hello', 'Please', 'Thank you, etc. They are *not* being rude.
- ★ Ask direct questions which put the child on the spot, especially when other people are watching and waiting for an answer.
- ★ Look directly at the child when you are hoping that they might say something.
- ★ Penalise the child for not talking or tell them that they are talking too quietly.
- ★ React when the child finally talks. Simply carry on as if they have always spoken, responding positively to what they *say*, rather than the fact that they spoke. Later you can remark on how much fun you had, how good they are at reading, etc.

PLEASE DO NOT:

- ★ Make the child repeat themselves in public if you don't hear (it's great that they are talking at all!). Do say in private, 'Sorry, I don't understand', or 'That was a great try but I'm sorry, I didn't hear', or 'Did you say X or Y?'.
- ★ Tell the child off in public – have a quiet word in private about your expectations.
- ★ Treat the child too delicately – they enjoy banter the same as anyone else!
- ★ Follow opting out with special treatment or privileges because this can delay gradual participation.
- ★ Anticipate the child's every need. Instead, hold back, give permission ('It's OK to …') and create opportunities for them to start taking the lead.
- ★ Object if the child talks to you through their friends – they could be valuable allies in the child's intervention programme. But do make sure that the child is comfortable enough to communicate with you non-verbally when needed. For example, they could confirm you heard their friend correctly by nodding or shaking their head.
- ★ Be afraid to say 'Hey, please can you keep the noise down!' as necessary.
- ★ Be surprised if the child looks confused, does the wrong thing or does nothing. Anxious children are often too tense to process information quickly or accurately, so repeat your instructions quietly and calmly.
- ★ Spring surprises on the child; instead, prepare them for changes and transitions with photographs, visits and pictorial timetables.
- ★ Allow the child to become isolated. Actively foster friendships with peers, both in and outside school through games, shared projects, interests and activities.
- ★ Dwell on what the child *can't* do. Discover their interests and talents and let them shine. ☺

Other useful handouts

Handout 4 'What to say when …'

Handout 5 'Selective mutism is a phobia'

An advice sheet for parents, carers and teachers

ENSURING AN ANXIETY-FREE ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE SELECTIVE MUTISM

PLEASE DO:

- ★ Recognise that selective mutism is an anxiety disorder; a phobia of talking which young people can only overcome by taking small steps forward in a controlled way at their own pace. By removing speech anxiety in everyday situations, you will enable young people to benefit fully from an agreed intervention programme.
- ★ Remember that this is a genuine difficulty and it will get worse if the young person feels any pressure to speak or has a sense of being made into a public spectacle. Have patience and let them speak when they are ready.
- ★ Engage the young person through their interests and talents, their sense of humour and by asking for their help. Tell them what a good job they did.
- ★ Include the young person by talking to them in a chatty, friendly way without expecting an answer. Make comments, rather than asking direct questions; for example, 'I'd love to know where this came from, it's gorgeous', rather than 'Where did you get that?'
- ★ Provide the *opportunity* to speak, rather than making demands; for example, 'I *love* this colour. I wonder what you used to mix it?', rather than 'How did you make this?'
- ★ Warmly respond to the young person's attempts to communicate through gesture or whispering, by talking back in a natural way as if they had spoken.
- ★ Reassure the young person in private that you won't single them out in a group to answer a question, read aloud or demonstrate an activity unless they let you know that *they want to be chosen*. Say that they can start talking as soon as they feel ready but, until then, there are plenty of other ways to get the best out of school, college or work life or their chosen activity. It's OK to laugh or join in when the group speaks in unison – whatever they can manage.
- ★ Give the young person a means of sharing good news and letting you know if anything has upset them, eg through email, a liaison book or a go-between.
- ★ Establish communication and build rapport wherever possible by email.
- ★ Make hands-up, thumbs-up or eye contact and a nod generally acceptable at registration if the young person is struggling to answer.
- ★ Encourage young people to sit or work with friends they talk to in other settings and ask questions through their friends. Move away to make it easier for them to answer.
- ★ Tell the class or group that you welcome all forms of contribution – listening, speaking or making notes.

PLEASE DO:

- ★ Include activities in which speech is optional, making this clear before you start.
- ★ Include the young person in other activities by offering alternative forms of communication. For example: holding up, underlining, circling or pointing to their answer; writing on sticky notes, a dry-wipe board or a computer screen; texting; emailing. Ask them which method they prefer for different activities.
- ★ Provide opportunities to talk in situations that may be less threatening to the young person. For example: 'Please could you take [N] to the lockers and show her where to put her bag?'; 'Why not take your parents to the hall and get them a cup of tea before the rush?'; 'Please help [N]. He's not sure what he's got to do'.
- ★ Make sure that peers don't pressurise the young person to speak and understand that they will speak in their own time. Check for, and stop, actual or cyber bullying and teasing.
- ★ Look for positive behaviour and let the young person know how well they are doing.
- ★ Let the young person sit at the back or side of the classroom to get a good vantage point.
- ★ Encourage general creativity and expression through art, film making and design.
- ★ Encourage independence and ensure success. Rather than doing things *for* the young person, do things *with* them initially and then withdraw, or make things *easier*.
- ★ Have the same expectations of good behaviour as for any other young person.

PLEASE DO NOT:

- ★ Be hurt or offended when the young person remains silent.
- ★ Confuse a fixed facial expression with glaring, defiance, being uninterested or smirking.
- ★ Beg, bribe, persuade or challenge the young person to speak, or make it your mission to get them to talk.
- ★ Make the young person say 'Hi', 'Please', 'Thank you', etc. They are *not* being rude.
- ★ Penalise the young person for not talking or tell them they are talking too quietly.
- ★ Ask direct questions which put the young person on the spot, especially when other people are watching and waiting for an answer. Use comments which they might respond to.
- ★ Look directly at the young person when you are hoping that they might say something.
- ★ React when the young person speaks in public. Simply carry on as if they have always spoken, responding positively to what they *say*, rather than the fact that they spoke.
- ★ Make the young person repeat themselves in public if you don't hear them.
- ★ Chastise the young person in public – have a quiet word in private about your expectations.
- ★ Treat the young person too delicately – they enjoy banter the same as anyone else!

PLEASE DO NOT:

- ★ Expect the young person to initiate interaction, even in ways which don't require talking. Initiation is extremely difficult for most individuals with SM. Make sure that you or other people take the lead to enable the young person to find a partner, get help, obtain an item or report a loss, bullying or illness, for example. It will also be important to ensure access to such basics as the toilet, food and water without needing to speak.
- ★ Follow opting out with special treatment or privileges because this can delay gradual participation.
- ★ Anticipate the young person's every need. Instead, hold back, give permission ('It's OK to …') and create opportunities for them to start taking the lead.
- ★ Allow the young person to become isolated. Actively foster friendships with peers, both in and outside the educational or work setting, through shared projects, interests and activities.
- ★ Object if the young person talks to you through their friends – they could be valuable allies in the young person's intervention programme. But make sure that the young person is comfortable enough to communicate with you non-verbally when needed; for example, they could confirm the message you received by nodding or shaking their head.
- ★ Be surprised if the young person looks confused, does the wrong thing or does nothing. Anxious individuals are often too tense to process information quickly or accurately, so repeat instructions quietly and calmly, as necessary.
- ★ Spring surprises on the young person. Instead, prepare them for changes and transitions with advance visits, timetables and brochures or photographs, as appropriate.
- ★ Leave the young person out of plans for school or college trips or work experience. These involve environments which are usually much less stressful than the classroom.
- ★ Dwell on what the young person *can't* do. Discover their interests and talents and let them shine. ☺

Other useful handouts

Handout 4 'What to say when …'

Handout 5 'Selective mutism is a phobia'

ENVIRONMENTAL CHECKLIST FOR EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Ensuring an anxiety-free environment for children and young people who have selective mutism

Student's name [N]:_____ Date of birth:_____

Setting:_____ Year group: _____

Completed by:_____

Purpose: to help identify and eliminate possible causes of anxiety which could be adversely affecting [N]'s self-esteem and progress in communication.

Aim: for staff and family to make appropriate adjustments, where necessary, in order to agree with each statement (✓).

Communication	**Date**	**Review date**
Using non-verbal, written or verbal means (eg talking through a friend), [N] has a way of:		
Gaining attention/acknowledgment		
Protesting/indicating dislikes		
Expressing need to go to the toilet		
Obtaining help/clarification for homework/course work		
Obtaining general help/clarification during the school day		
Making a lunch selection		
Reporting teasing/bullying/illness		
Natural alternative forms of communication are encouraged (eg gesture, pointing to words/pictures/symbols, writing) rather than an unfamiliar alternative communication system		
Participation		
Using either verbal or alternative forms of communication, [N] is routinely able to participate in (add/delete as appropriate):		
Registration/roll-call		
Circle time or 'bring and share' activities		
Reading activities		
Writing/spelling activities		
Class assembly		
PE sessions		
Drama sessions		
School trips/work experience		
Staff do not do things *for* [N] but *with* [N], giving whatever support [N] needs in order to manage part of the activity or make some contribution		

(*Continued*)

Name of student [N]:

Social relationships and self-esteem	**Date**	**Review date**
Staff involve [N] in usual greetings/conversation/banter by using commentary-style talk, rather than asking questions		
[N] is befriended by others in class and is included in class/team activities		
[N] spends break/lunch-times with other students		
[N] routinely gains success/acknowledgement through realistic targets and desirable behaviour (eg kindness/taking the lead/physical activity/ responsibility/ participation)		
[N]'s strengths/special interests are recognised/valued by classmates		
Teasing/bullying occurs rarely, if at all, and is addressed to everyone's satisfaction		
Support		
Staff have reassured [N] that he/she will be able to talk in time but there is no rush; meanwhile, there are other ways to participate and have fun		
Peers know they can best help by including [N] in all they do, waiting patiently, not trying to make [N] talk and not saying that [N] *can't* talk		
[N] has good rapport with at least one adult in the educational setting who is able to offer regular encouragement/support		
[N] is given 1:1 time for curriculum differentiation, rapport building and communication goals, as appropriate (ie little and often, rather than once a week)		
[N] knows that staff members will not single out [N] to talk in class but wait for [N] to volunteer information (until [N] is more comfortable with talking)		
If [N] speaks, staff members are primed to respond warmly but without direct praise or comment (*this does not include planned programme targets*)		
School/home is in regular contact through a liaison book or email to communicate [N]'s successes/news/concerns/queries/strategies, etc.		
General points		
[N] separates from the parent willingly and is confident about collection arrangements; or can travel to/from school independently		
Apart from rare occasions, [N] smiles frequently (and genuinely – not a fixed smile) and looks relaxed throughout the day		
The seating position allows [N] to observe other people and not feel scrutinised		
[N] eats lunch with his or her peers		
[N] uses the school toilet		
[N] is not given extra attention/privileges for silence/opting out (*apart from the 1:1 support necessary to address needs and move forward*)		
[N] is allowed to experience some disappointment/frustration as a result of not speaking (eg occasionally misses out) and maintains incentive to change		
Staff members have access to a support network for further information about selective mutism and as a sounding board for their ideas		
A plan is in place to address [N]'s speech anxiety, which has been agreed with student and parent(s)		

ENVIRONMENTAL CHECKLIST FOR HOME SETTING

Ensuring an anxiety-free environment for children and young people who have selective mutism

Child or young person's name [N]:_____

Completed by:_____

Purpose: to help identify and eliminate possible causes of anxiety which could be adversely affecting [N]'s self-esteem and progress in communication.

Aim: for the family to make appropriate adjustments, where necessary, so that family members and relevant professionals agree with each statement (✓).

Home and community	Date	Review
Talking outside the home is culturally/socially acceptable; if not, permission has been actively given for appropriate settings		
Socialising is modelled and encouraged within the family and [N] is enabled to participate comfortably in social activities with and without parents present		
SM is explained to and/or discussed *with* [N], rather than in front of [N]		
[N]'s difficulty talking is openly acknowledged by parent(s) and reassurance has been given that it will not last		
Friends, family and members of the community in regular contact with [N] have been educated about SM and have modified their behaviour accordingly		
[N] does not experience distress as a result of teasing or bullying		
[N] is not pressed to talk when clearly uncomfortable but, rather than opting out completely, is helped to participate in other ways		
[N] does not use inappropriate non-verbal communication or whispering when alone with parent(s) because they have learned from parent that it is ineffective		
Parents do not answer for [N]		
[N] gets ready for their educational setting willingly, and travels there either independently or with a parent/peer/sibling, as appropriate to their age		
[N] has the opportunity to play/share activities or communicate with peers out of school hours (includes email, texting, online messaging)		
[N] gets more attention/physical contact when they are succeeding/ participating/playing/helping than when they are anxious/shy/opting out		
[N] has a regular physical outlet and gets enough sleep		
[N] has skills, interests or talents to focus on, enjoy and be proud of		
If clear speech is an issue, it is encouraged through modelling, rather than correction		
[N] is self-motivated to improve through the experience and enjoyment of success; in contrast to opting out to avoid failure/correction/criticism		
[N] experiences normal disappointment/frustration as a result of not speaking (eg occasionally misses out) and expresses their desire to talk		
Parent(s) have access to a support network of other parents with experience of selective mutism		
A plan is in place to address [N]'s speech anxiety, and this has been agreed with [N] and their educational setting		