

An advice sheet for early years practitioners and carers working with quiet children

HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN TO SPEAK AT SCHOOL



Early years staff members have seen an increase in the number of children who talk happily and noisily to close family but say much less outside the home. Children need to be eased into new settings gently, so that initial reluctance to speak does not become an intense fear of speaking.



Why is this happening? While family life gets busier, children are going into school younger and may not be ready to separate from parents and talk confidently to strangers. Some children are particularly sensitive to change and anything new. Well-meaning attempts to encourage speech can actually make them *more* anxious about talking.



Turn this worrying trend around now! By expecting *less* while supporting *more*, children are allowed to succeed and develop the confidence to take small steps forward.

Be positive and reassuring

- ❖ As soon as it becomes clear that children are remaining silent in response to questions, have a private chat to reassure them. Say you know they want to talk but are finding it difficult at the moment. Tell them not to worry because talking will get easier and they don't have to talk straightaway. Ask them to concentrate on having fun and then it will be easier to be brave and have a go.
- ❖ Make sure that *no* adult applies pressure to talk using bribery, persuasion or negative comments. *Never* force children to say 'Hello', 'Please', 'Thank you', etc. Social conventions are extremely difficult for anxious children.

Build confidence

- ❖ Look out for children who are stiff or frozen in their facial expression or body movements. This is usually caused by extreme anxiety. Focus on physical activity, laughter and general noise making to help them relax.
- ❖ Include plenty of activities which involve children moving, singing or talking *in unison*.
- ❖ Adopt a self-registration system, or repeat 'Is _____ here?', so that the whole class gets to know each other as they answer in unison each time.

- ❖ Parents can reduce the anxiety of separation by giving children something of theirs to look after before they leave. Arrange an early return so that parents can join in and make the last part of the session a positive experience.
- ❖ Welcome parents as volunteer helpers for the whole group, not just their child.
- ❖ Encourage non-English-speaking parents to learn and use English at school, to show their child that it's OK to have a go and make mistakes.
- ❖ Organise playground activities and make sure each quiet child has a friend at playtime. Encourage parents to invite the same children home to play.
- ❖ Give extra smiles and attention when children try anything new. Do things *with* children or make things *easier*, rather than doing things *for* them.
- ❖ Ensure that children can access the toilet, drinking water and first aid without asking.

Gradually facilitate speech, being guided by the child's response

- ❖ Encourage *all* children to record messages for each other at home to add to their photographs on a computer or to share with recording devices such as Talking Tins®.
- ❖ Assign an adult to befriend and play with quiet children for short periods of time.
- ❖ Don't ask direct questions while building rapport. Instead, chat in the style of a running commentary, with pauses so that children can join in when they feel ready: "Wow, look how tall you made your tower!"; "I wonder if that's a horse ... or maybe it's a dog ..."; "This is fun, isn't it?". Be prepared to do all the talking for a while!
- ❖ When the child gestures (eg nods or points), talk back as if they spoke to you.
- ❖ When children are relaxed enough to laugh, smile, nod and shake their heads, help them answer questions by providing a *choice*: "What's this on your tree – are they apples or cherries?" Smile and allow a full five seconds for them to answer. If they don't reply, move on the conversation in a positive way: "They look very tasty!" If children struggle to answer near other people, only use the choice technique one-to-one. If they tense up, even on a one-to-one basis, return to commentary-style chat until they relax again.
- ❖ When children speak, praise their ideas or the way they joined in, rather than the fact that they spoke: "Hey, you chose your book really quickly today!"
- ❖ Once children have begun to talk, turn gestures into speech by seeking clarification: "I can see you nodding. Does that mean you want milk or juice?"; "You're pointing over there, are you showing me Tommy or Max?"; "You're shaking your head, does that mean you want to play outside or stay here?"

Do some investigation

- ❖ Ask parents which language is spoken at home, how much the child speaks with family and friends, and whether they have any concerns about their child's pronunciation or ability to understand or speak in sentences.
- ❖ Share the above advice on facilitating speech if the child is quiet with family or friends.

- ❖ Let parents know that you are very pleased with how their child is settling in and that you are working on building their confidence, so that they can do as well with you as they do at home.
- ❖ Make sure that parents are not putting pressure on the child by telling them they must speak at school or with relatives because this will increase separation anxiety and stop the child looking forward to school and social events.
- ❖ Seek advice about bilingualism if appropriate.
- ❖ Ask for advice from the local speech and language therapy service if language development appears to be delayed.
- ❖ If the above advice has been followed for six weeks, and the child is speaking much more at home than at school, the child could have a condition called selective mutism (SM). Continue this advice while seeking information about SM for home and school.

Suitable children's books

Penguin by Polly Dunbar (2007), Walker Books.

Little by Little by Amber Stewart (2008), Oxford University Press.

Lamb Says Boo! by Katherine Sully (2010), Alligator Books Ltd.

Additional resources

Talking Tins[®], Talking Products Ltd, www.talkingproducts.co.uk.

Supporting Quiet Children: Exciting Ideas and Activities to Help 'Reluctant Talkers' Become 'Confident Talkers' by Maggie Johnson and Michael Jones (2012), Lawrence Educational.

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual, 2nd edition, by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens (2016), Speechmark Publishing Ltd.

A technique for parents and early years practitioners working with children who have selective mutism

THE INFORMAL SLIDING-IN TECHNIQUE

This technique will help young children talk to familiar adults without anxiety, at their own pace. Depending on the child's initial anxiety level, the following steps can be accomplished either in a single session or over 2–3 weeks. Children over five years old may do better with the more formal version of this technique (Handout 16).

Key

[P] = Parent or other talking partner; [N] = Name of child; [A] = new Adult.

Steps

- 1 [P] and [N] are given time and space to play together, uninterrupted, until [N] talks easily to [P]. This could be in either the corner of the main room or a separate area, depending on [N]'s anxiety level. If in a separate room, try to leave the door slightly open, but some children only relax and talk with the door shut. It may take several sessions to gain [N]'s trust that it is 'safe' to talk.
- 2 If using a separate area, [P] warns [N] that [A] may need to come in for a very short time but will not interrupt their game. This is not necessary if [P] and [N] are playing in an open area, and [A] has been occupied on the other side of the room. [P] engages [N] in an activity that involves talking: a game or an activity that [N] enjoys and finds very easy to do.
- 3 [A] waits until [N] can be heard talking freely and then approaches or enters the room. [A] replaces some toys, finds a book, gets a drink or reads in a nearby chair, for example, *keeping their back turned*. If [N] comments, it is fine for [A] to say something like 'You carry on, I'm just going to ...' and then turn *their* back. If [N] becomes silent, [A] leaves or moves away after two minutes. If [N] seems happy to keep talking, [A] can stay longer. When [A] leaves, [P] focuses on making the rest of the play session relaxed and fun. There is no need to discuss what has happened unless [N] mentions it. If necessary, reassure [N], eg 'It's OK to talk to me in front of [P]. She just wants you to have a nice time'. Repeat this step once or twice (either after a short break or on separate occasions), until [N] can talk to [P] with [A] nearby.
- 4 [A] then shows interest in [N]'s game or story and asks whether they can watch or listen too. [A] faces [P] and [N] this time but looks at the activity rather than at [N]. [A] waits until the end of the activity before leaving, saying how much they enjoyed it. The hope is that [N] will continue to talk despite being watched but, if not, repeat this step, waiting a bit longer before turning round to ensure that [N] is relaxed and involved with the activity.

- 5 If [N] continues to talk, [A] slowly moves in to join [P] and [N], sitting at their table or on the floor, closer to [P] so that [N] does not feel too overwhelmed. [A] talks to [P] rather than [N], making general comments rather than asking questions, eg 'I love this story'. It may help if [A] says something wrong because [N] may correct this without thinking, eg '[N]'s got the horse'. If [N] doesn't respond, [P] can pass on, 'Is that right, have you got the horse?' and then pass back the answer, 'No, [N] says it's a zebra!'
- 6 Once [N] tolerates [A]'s presence easily, and continues talking to [P], [A] says something like 'This looks great fun – I'd love to play too if that's all right'. [A] now either takes turns in a game; takes turns with [P] to read a page of a story* with [N] saying the repeated line on each page; or starts to build a model, etc, asking more questions through [P], eg 'Does [N] know where this goes, Mummy?' [P] passes on the question and returns the answer as in step 5. If [N] doesn't reply after five seconds, calmly move on, eg 'It's OK, I've worked it out now!' Don't prolong this stage too long – once [N] has spoken a few times, move away because this is a massive step which can quickly become overwhelming if [N] is not given some space.
- 7 When [N] is talking comfortably through [P], or in a turn-taking game, [A] asks [N] direct questions, starting with 'X or Y?' choices, eg 'This is a funny-looking animal. Do you think it's a horse or a cow?'
- 8 Once [N] is talking directly to [A], it is time for the final step. At the next session, or after a short break, repeat step 7, with the aim of [N] talking to [A] without the reassurance of [P]'s presence. At first, [P] leaves [N] to play alone with [A] but remains in the same room. If this does not cause any problems, a warning is then given that [P] has to pop out for a short while but will be back.



On no account should [P] leave the building without informing [N].

*** Examples of books with repeating lines (there are many more!)**

'The Gingerbread Man' (a classic folktale); *Me Too!* by Mercer Mayer (2001); *Oh No!* by Candace Fleming (2012); *Jump, Frog, Jump* by Robert Kalan (1989); *Pierre* by Maurice Sendak (2007).