

## A technique for parents and staff working with school-aged children and young people who have selective mutism

# THE SLIDING-IN TECHNIQUE

This technique helps individuals talk to familiar adults. It should be used as part of an overall programme, as described in *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual* (Johnson & Wintgens, 2016). The following steps can be accomplished in about 1½–2 hours over a single session or in several 10–15 minute sessions held three to five times a week (more suitable for very anxious children or when time is at a premium). Children less than five years old require the informal version of this technique (Handout 15).

### Key

[P] = Parent or other talking partner (eg the child's sibling or school keyworker);

[N] = Name of child or young person; [A] = new Adult.



**If you are using school or clinic premises, arrange a quiet place and time for [P] and [N] to play, read or talk together uninterrupted, possibly over several sessions, as the Sliding-in Technique cannot start until [N] is comfortable talking to [P] in this setting using their normal speaking voice. Make this easier for [N] by ensuring that activities are easy and enjoyable, so [N] does not feel tested. This is a good time to find out which rote sequences [N] can recite confidently, eg counting, days of the week, months of the year, letters of the alphabet.**

### Steps

- 1 [P] or [A] explains to [N] that they know how hard it is for [N] to talk to new people. That, whenever they try, a nasty feeling or panic reaction stops the words coming out. You are going to show them a way to get rid of that feeling, so that talking feels much easier. Explain that first [N] will get comfortable talking to [P] and then [A] will very gradually get closer and join in. You will break it down into such tiny steps that [N]'s usual panic feelings won't have a chance to build up. [N] is bound to feel a bit worried or anxious at first because it's new, but not enough to stop them talking.

Tell [N] exactly what they need to do as you go along and that they must make sure you only change one thing at a time – that is the secret to making it work! Stress that it's up to [N] how far you go in each session. You will only continue for as long as they feel comfortable, or until it is time to stop (always tell [N] how long the session will last).

- 2 Introduce an appropriate recording system, such as a sticker chart for younger children, where you will write the instructions for each target as you go along. Each target can be described as a target, a goal, an assignment or a step, depending on [N]'s age and interests. After each target is achieved, [N] will check it off with a tick, sticker or star; or, if older, a note of their anxiety level on a scale from 0 (no anxiety) to 5 (panic stations).

Older teens with a good understanding of the rationale can usually work through without checking off each step but it is useful to check their anxiety level intermittently, asking them to hold up zero to five fingers. More than three fingers means you need to take a break, slow down or repeat earlier targets to bring their anxiety down.

Write down (or *draw* for children who have comprehension difficulties) two to four targets that [N] has *already* achieved. For example, listening and learning about SM; a rapport-building activity with [A]; and two talking activities they recently did with [P] such as playing a game, reading aloud or counting to a hundred in tens. Use these targets to show [N] how the recording system works. It's a nice bonus for young children because they get stickers straightaway!



**After every target achieved, [A] returns to congratulate [N], check off the target and set a new one. Keep things very calm and don't rush selecting a sticker, etc. This is an important time for [N]'s anxiety level and heart rate to drop before attempting the next target. When [N] does particularly well and uses a louder voice, for example, feel free to give two stickers!**

- 3** Now the target-setting begins. Each target is explained and written down, one at a time, in a confident manner: 'This is what we do next', rather than 'Shall we try this?' or 'Do you think you can manage this now?' [N] is told that, to make it as easy as possible, the first target is to repeat the talking activities with [P] which they have just checked off. [A] leaves the room, closes the door and moves some distance away while they do them. (In an open-plan setting, you may get away with going round the corner and waiting out of sight.)

The targets are different, of course, because now [N] knows that [A] is outside. Write down the first target (an activity that involves talking, is very easy to do, and takes less than three minutes). Agree a signal so that [N] or [P] can let [A] know they have completed the target (eg ring a bell, knock on the table or open the door). [A] takes up their position but may return to the door a little early to check whether they can hear [N]'s voice.

- 4** Afterwards, [P] may report that [N] could not talk or spoke in a whisper. In both cases, [A] takes responsibility and says that they were standing too close for [N] to talk or 'use their big voice'; eg 'I'm not surprised you found that hard. You must have been very worried that I could hear you'. Add an extra clause to [N]'s target ('with [A] waiting ... at the end of the corridor/in the staffroom/upstairs/in the garden', etc), to stress that it will be impossible for [A] to hear [N]. Repeat steps 3 and 4 until [N] achieves, and checks off, both targets.



**If [N] does not achieve a target, this is because the steps were not small enough, not because [N] failed. [N] does not get a sticker, etc on these occasions but this is not mentioned. Attention is diverted to a different target. Keep the focus on achievement, rather than disappointment.**



**It is essential that [N] uses their voice throughout the programme, albeit at a reduced volume. If whispering is allowed to persist, [N] will not learn that their anxiety can be overcome. There is no need to spell it out, but it will soon become clear to [N] that the targets are to talk rather than whisper. [A]'s ongoing feedback will be very important here, eg 'Oh no! I've scared your big voice away, haven't I?'**



If [N] does not achieve a target, make the target easier or:



- ★ For short sessions, end the session early. Focus on achieved targets and congratulate [N] on doing so well. Don't fill the remainder of the time by repeating targets or doing an unchallenging activity because this loses momentum and removes the need for [N] to stretch herself or himself.
- ★ For long sessions, take a break. [A] leaves [N] to relax with [P] for a while. Then repeat the last two successful targets and progress in smaller steps.

- 5 If [A] is a long distance away, repeat the activity with [A] a bit closer until [A] is at least in the same building!
- 6 Now change the activity to counting if this has not already been done. [P] and [N] count to 10, then 20, taking it in turns: [P] says 'one', [N] says 'two', and so on. Aim for a good pace and steady rhythm (slightly faster than one digit per second).

(**Note:** if [N] whispers, make it easier by changing the target to [P] and [N] counting to 10 together; then counting together to nine with [N] saying 'ten' on their own; before trying the original target again.)



**It is essential for [N] to start each target with their voice. In this way, even young children can note the exact moment when their throat tightens to a whisper, and become increasingly adept at recovering the original, relaxed sensation. A target can be regarded as achieved as long as [N] starts and finishes with voice.**

- 7 The next target is to repeat the counting activity as [A] approaches the closed door. This can be done in one or several steps, depending on [A]'s starting point. [A] returns to the same location while [P] and [N] count alternately to 10 to get [N]'s voice 'flowing'. Then, as [P] and [N] continue to 20, [A] walks towards the door ([A] agrees to count to 10 before starting their approach). Continue to change either [A]'s starting position or the activity (eg take turns saying the days of the week or letters of the alphabet) until [N] can talk with [A] standing right outside the room.
- 8 Repeat the counting activity to 10 but, this time, [A] does not quite shut the door on their way out of the room – the door should be pulled to, but not closed. At the end of the activity, [A] does not wait for the agreed signal and enters the room to congratulate [N] and check off the target. It is now established that the signal is not needed because [A] can hear and knows when [P] and [N] have finished.

(**Note:** if [N] whispers throughout, [P] and [N] repeat step 7, counting alternately to 10 with the door fully closed to recover [N]'s voice. Then repeat, with [A] opening the door a fraction just before the end of the counting. If [N]'s voice drops to a whisper for their last few numbers, it is time to either end the session or take a break. It may help to tell [N] that you have already heard their voice through the door, and to remind them that you are not planning to come into the room at the moment. If they can manage to keep their voice going with the door not properly shut, they will have faced

their biggest challenge and their anxiety will start to fade. Once achieved, the next target is to open the door fractionally halfway through the counting and, finally, to repeat step 8.)



**At the start of every new target-setting session, ease [N] back to the point they reached before by repeating the last two or three targets achieved in the previous session. By keeping targets short, it should always be possible to move forward at each session, despite backtracking initially.**



**If targets are repeated during the same session, don't write them out again. [N] adds a second sticker or tick to the same target to represent consolidation rather than progress. When repeating previous targets at the start of a new session, however, write them out again because they represent a significant new starting point.**

- 9 Repeat step 8 but [P] and [N] count to 20 (or as high as [N] can manage easily), taking it in turns. Despite the door being pulled to, [N] is told they are doing very well to count with the door open. If [N]'s voice is extremely quiet, but more than a whisper, repeat this step with another rote sequence such as the days of the week, months of the year or letters of the alphabet, depending on [N]'s age.
- 10 The next target is for [P] and [N] to count to 20 as before, with the door pulled to but not fully closed. This time, [A] s-l-o-w-l-y opens the door halfway through the counting: 'Just a little bit, not enough for me to come in'. Aim to open the door a good 15 centimetres for the last few numbers.

**(Note:** if [N] whispers, open the door by smaller degrees, or don't open it until later in the counting sequence. Eventually, [N] will be able to talk with the door open 15 cm, but it may be necessary for [N] to rest and resume this activity on another day.)



**Be flexible and take steps faster or slower according to [N]'s anxiety level. For example, if [N]'s voice is quiet but strong at step 10, combine steps 11–13 and ask [A] to join in the counting as they open the door and walk into the room.**

- 11 It is now time for [A] to join in the turn-taking circle *from their position outside the room*. [P] and [N] count alternately to 10 but then [A] says 'eleven', [P] 'twelve', [N] 'thirteen', and so on, up to 20. If young children are only confident counting up to 10 or 12, [A] joins in after [N] says 'six'.
- 12 Repeat with a different rote sequence depending on [N]'s age (see step 8.). This time [A] joins in from the beginning after [P] and [N] have taken their turns.
- 13 Repeat a turn-taking count to 20 with [A] entering the room halfway through, s-l-o-w-l-y opening the door, stepping into the room, closing the door and walking over to sit with [N] and [P] as they finish counting to 20. If [N]'s voice is fairly strong and [N] is good at counting, [A] does not end there but continues by saying 'twenty-one', looking to [P] to continue the sequence. Stop counting at 30 and give [N] *two* ticks, stickers or stars; not



only was the current target achieved, but also the next one (counting in a circle with [A] sitting at the table).

**(Note:** if [N] looks surprised and does not continue the extended sequence, nothing has been lost. [A] simply apologises straightaway with a comment such as 'Oh no! You were doing so well. I went on to the next target by mistake – sorry, that's my fault'.

If [N] whispers, mouths the words, or says nothing as [A] approaches, build up to this target slowly by stopping as soon as [A] has opened the door; and repeating with [A] moving further into the room each time. Or [A] can enter the room backwards and take an outward-facing chair at the table, delaying eye contact until step 14.)

- 14** Repeat the previous target, explaining that [A] will walk over and sit down to finish the counting. The real difference this time is that [A] will not leave the room at the start of the counting, but there is no need to draw attention to that when writing the target. [A] stands at the doorway while [P] and [N] begin the counting; approaches the table at about number 8; sits down at about number 15 and continues counting to 20 while sitting at the table. If [N] does not sound anxious and makes eye contact with [A], omit the next step.



**Step 14 is omitted when working through in a single session or if [N] and [P] are sitting very near to the door.**

- 15** [A] no longer needs to move away from the table. Count to 10 in the usual order, followed by the days of the week, then go back round the circle in *reverse* order, counting to 10 and saying the days of the week. This gets [N] used to speaking after [A] rather than [P]. Alternatively, substitute any of the sequences listed in step 8.

[N]'s voice may be quiet but it should not sound strained.

- 16** [N] is now ready for structured turn-taking games or activities requiring a single-word response. See Appendix A of *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual* for ideas, and progress to sentences after two or three activities, ensuring that [N] has no difficulty with the content or skills required. It is important for [N] not to worry about *what* they are saying; the focus is on staying relaxed so that [N]'s voice can flow. Keep all activities as short as possible, to save time and maintain momentum. Reverse the order of turns so that [N] both responds to and addresses [A].

[N] may still be looking at [P] while addressing [A], in which case introduce an activity involving [N] looking at [A] to get a clue or signal.



**If [P]'s time is limited, or sessions are difficult to arrange, [P] can slide out after one turn-taking game in step 15.**

- 17** In this final step, [N] repeats an easy activity with [A] alone, on the understanding that [P] will return later on. [P] waits for the activity to begin and then leaves the room. If more than one talking partner has been involved (eg both parents), [N] chooses who will leave the room first, and carries out this step first without [P1] and then without [P1] or [P2]. This is a great achievement: [A] has now become one of [N]'s talking partners, and can lead the next session without [P] present.

**(Note:** sliding out [P] is vital for [N]’s independence and confidence in talking to other people. If smaller steps are needed, [P] can initially move to a different part of the room, or just watch before leaving the room. Likewise, [P] may accompany [N] to the next session but leave the session for longer periods. Next, [N] should start the session without [P], knowing that [P] will join them for the final activity.)



**It is sensible to consolidate the use of single words and sentences by playing a couple of games for each type of language activity, eg picture naming, picture description, questions and directions, etc. But do not delay generalisation to other people and other settings unnecessarily.**



**Once speech has been established with [A] in this way, [A] becomes a talking partner [P] and can use the same technique to establish talking with other adults and peers, and gradually increase group size. Sessions can generally move faster now, without such a detailed breakdown into small steps. Support the development of spontaneous speech by only gradually moving from structured to unplanned activities (see Appendix A in The Selective Mutism Resource Manual for ideas).**

## A technique for parents and staff working with school-aged children and young people who have selective mutism

# THE READING ROUTE

This technique helps individuals move from reading to conversation with a familiar adult with whom they have good rapport. It should be used as part of an overall programme, as described in *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual* (Johnson & Wintgens, 2016).

It is suitable for individuals who can read aloud to the adult using a natural (not whispered or strained) voice, even if this is very quiet initially. Volume can be expected to increase as the steps are repeated and the associated anxiety decreases.

### Key

[N] = Name of child or young person who has selective mutism; [A] = the Adult.

### Preparation

Sessions are carried out on a one-to-one basis.

Ensure that all reading material is well within [N]'s reading capability. Choose texts that are age-appropriate and suited to the individual, for example, a joke book, newspaper, celebrity magazine, novel or book from the school reading scheme.

The end of the identified passage must always be made clear so that [N] knows when they have achieved the target and can stop reading.

### Steps

- [N] reads a short passage or poem.
- [A] and [N] take turns reading alternate sentences or lines from the same short passage or poem. This is repeated with different reading material.

If the voice is steady and at a reasonable volume, go straight to (d). Otherwise, use (c) to gradually improve the voice through repetition and relaxation, and to move from reading to more interactive turn taking.

- [A] and [N] read different characters' lines from a set number of pages or for a set number of minutes.

Some reading schemes include playscripts for this purpose. Local amateur dramatic companies can often lend comedy and pantomime scripts and television programme scripts are available to download online. See also 'I Say!' in Appendix F 'Talking resources'.

*And/or* [N] reads the days of the week and months of the year and then says them alternately with [A], aiming for steady pace, rhythm and voice (may be quiet but should not be strained).

*Or* [N] and [A] count to 10 and then 20, taking it in turns to say a number.



- 4 Reading games and activities involving turn taking, sentence completion and questions and answers.\*
- 5 Activities involving turn taking, sentence completion and questions and answers without reading.\*

\* See Appendix A of *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual*, Stages 5–7 for activity ideas which are coded by various anxiety triggers. Start with structured, factual activities which cause least anxiety, and gradually introduce less structured activities. One at a time, [N]'s friends and/or other adults may be invited to join in activities that [N] manages easily.