

Creating An Anxiety-free Environment for Children with Selective Mutism During *No Pens Day Wednesday*

An advice sheet for parents, carers and teachers.

DO:

- openly acknowledge the child's speech difficulty in an accepting and relaxed way, while stressing that the situation is only temporary;
- reassure the child they will find talking easier if they just take things slowly and try to join in one small step at a time;
- encourage communication in a relaxed atmosphere, with no pressure on the child to actually speak e.g. by warmly responding to attempts to communicate through gesture;
- introduce alternative forms of communication (e.g. pointing, holding up a picture) as a temporary stepping stone while the child is finding speech difficult;
- include whole class or small group activities which do not require speech, making this clear *before* the activity;
- invite parents to take part in classroom activities to ease the child into talking at school;
- prepare the child for changes and transitions well in advance, with photos, visits, and pictorial timetables;
- provide the *opportunity* rather than expectation to join in, e.g. 'I love this colour - I wonder what your favourite colour is?'; 'Look at this! I bet you haven't seen one of those before';
- try to find time to be with the child alone in a corner of the classroom or in a quiet room;
- set tasks which provide opportunities for speech in situations which the child may find less threatening e.g. 'Can you take [new child] to the pegs and show her where to put her PE bag?'; 'Take Mummy to the hall and show her the models 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 and associations with other children;
- use puppets, masks, voice-activated toys and recorded messages to help the child adopt another 'persona';
- allow hands-up or involve whole class in a social activity at registration;
- ensure relatives, supply teachers, playground and canteen staff understand child's needs.

DO NOT:

- be hurt or offended when children remain silent;
- beg, bribe or challenge the child to speak, nor let on how important it is to you to hear them talk;
- ask direct questions which put the child on the spot, especially when others are watching and waiting for an answer;
- look directly at the child after providing the opportunity to speak;
- anticipate the child's every need;
- give special attention for being silent, but do reward effort to communicate, help or participate in whatever form that may take.

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