

# Children with Selective Mutism: Supporting confident communication



## What is Selective Mutism?

Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder resulting in a child being able to talk comfortably to some people (e.g. close family members), but they are silent or unable to talk at the same level when other people are present. It can be common for children to be “shy” or take time to settle into a new setting with unfamiliar people. However, selective mutism could be considered if a child is unable to talk with the same people or in the same situations for over 1 month.

## General advice:

- Do not put pressure on the child to speak—this will only increase their anxiety.
- Re-assure the child that you understand they find it difficult to talk and they don't have to until they feel ready. Explain that talking will get easier.
- Acknowledge and accept all attempts (verbal or non-verbal) to communicate or interact in the classroom.
- Consider alternative methods the child can use that they are comfortable with using (e.g. thumbs up for the register, pointing, using gesture, writing, waving).



- Ensure that children can access the toilet, drinking water and first aid without having to ask if possible.
- Building a trusting relationship between adults in the classroom and the child/young person is important. Spend one-to-one time with the child/young person completing activities the child/young person is motivated by.
- Consider if a home/school diary is useful to help communication between both environments e.g. the child's motivators, events which may exacerbate their anxiety. Always ask the child/young person's permission to discuss anything in-front of them or to show videos of them talking to another person. Having attention brought to themselves may exacerbate their anxiety.

### Building confidence:

- Involve the child in activities/tasks throughout the day where there is no pressure to talk.
- Think about and help the child to see what they can already do (e.g. taking turns, sharing, writing). Show them that you value their skills and help them to see their achievements.
- Acknowledge and reward when the child has done something brave/ something that would have been difficult but ensure you do this sensitively and away from others to avoid drawing additional attention to them, as this may increase their anxiety further.
- Complete activities which involve children moving, singing or talking as a whole class. This will help the child to feel that the focus isn't just on them.
- For children with additional separation anxiety, encourage parents to collect their child early to join in the last part of the session to make it a positive experience in school. They could give their child something of theirs to look after during the school day.
- When children speak a different language at home (where they are able to communicate openly) to school (where they experience situational mutism), there is a risk that the anxiety may become associated with that particular language. Support your child/ the child's family so they have opportunities to use and hear their languages in different contexts. This might include:
  - Opportunities to use/ teach some English words at home
  - Setting staff/ friends learning some words in their home language
  - Hearing non-English-speaking parents to use some English when at school, to demonstrate to their child that it is okay to use English and possibly make some mistakes



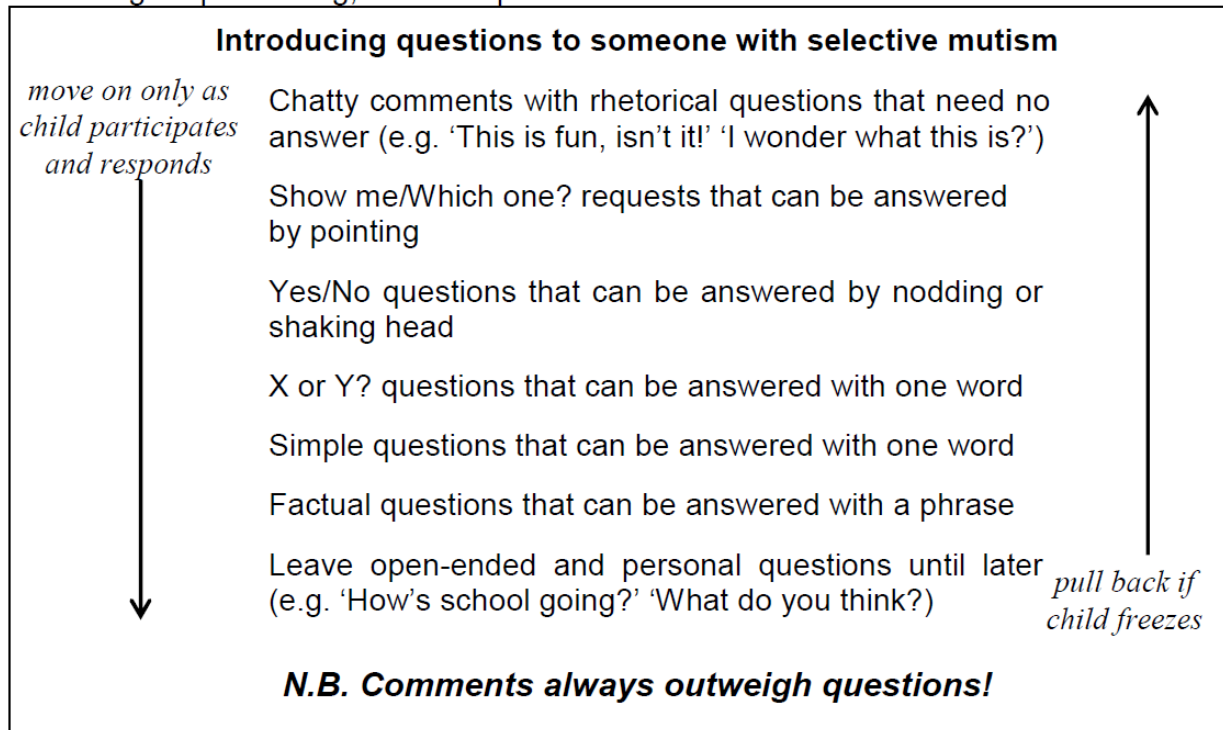
### Use of questions:

Children with Selective Mutism may find questions difficult and some questions may cause more anxiety than others. Try using more comments than questions (e.g. "this is a blue brick and this is a yellow brick" rather than "what colour are these?").

To introduce questions, try using the following hierarchy:



1. Staged questioning, at child's pace



**Speak to your Speech and Language Therapist:**

Please contact your Speech and Language Therapist for additional advice and support.

**Additional information can also be found online at:**

- SMIRA - Selective Mutism Information & Research Association
- NHS.uk - Selective Mutism