



**Selective Mutism Information Pack for
Nurseries and Families for Preschool
Children**

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How to use the Selective Mutism Pack:

This pack has been created for Early Years staff to support their understanding of Selective Mutism. The purpose of this pack is to provide guidance, strategies and resources to support Nursery staff to create a safe, welcoming, and encouraging environment where children with Selective Mutism feel comfortable to communicate and thrive.

This pack aims to increase awareness of Selective mutism for Nursery staff. This pack focuses on promoting inclusion within the Nursery environment, reducing anxiety and to supporting a child's confidence and well-being.



What is selective mutism?

Selective mutism is when a child may speak freely in situations where they feel comfortable (mostly commonly at home with parents and siblings). However, in other situations such as preschool setting, in social or public situations, they are unable to speak.

How it may feel for your child:

A child may feel a variety of physical responses when requested to verbally communicate e.g. their heart may race, their breathing might be quick or shallow, their muscles may be tense, they might feel frozen, have a dry mouth, tightness in their chest.

Signs of Selective Mutism:

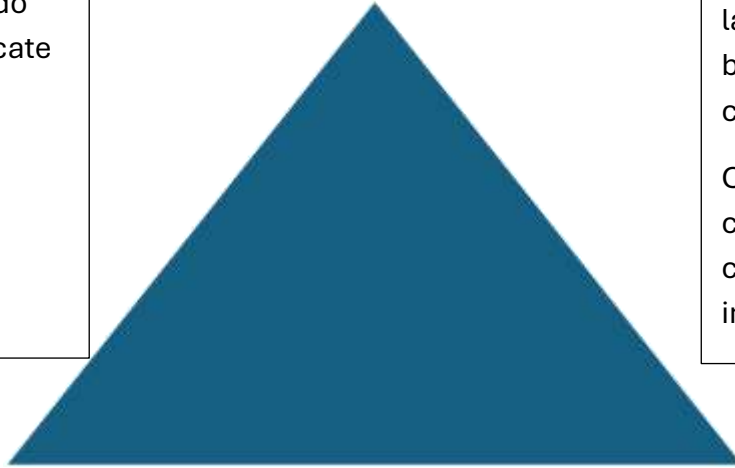
- May avoid eye contact with the person they are communicating with
- Not verbally communicating at school but are verbally communicating at home
- Whisper to particular peers in the classroom
- Withdrawn from participating from classroom activities
- Often described as “shy” within the classroom environment
- May have a preference to communicate with you nonverbally e.g. shaking or nodding their head.
- Some children may “freeze” during certain social situations (flight or fight response)
- May only feel comfortable around one particular friend or certain friends to play with at school
- May not initiate or respond when spoken to by others
- May have additional anxieties around toileting and eating
- A child may persist with signs of SM after a prolonged period of time after settling in e.g. 6-8 weeks



High profile vs Low profile:

High Profile: Children do not verbally communicate to certain people or in particular situations.

Children may appear frozen and visibly uncomfortable.



Low Profile: A child may communicate using limited language e.g. single words but will not initiate communication.

Children may feel more comfortable initiating communication with peers in comparison to adults.



What Early years setting can do to support SM and encourage quiet children:

Watch, wait, listen approach

Find out about their favourite things

Strategies:

Encouraging noisy games

Creating cosy spaces

Watch, wait and listen Approach:

- To develop confidence and encourage children to try, it is important to accept and acknowledge all communicative attempts.
- For instance, if a child makes a choice by looking at something they like, the next step may be for a child to choose through pointing.
- If we put children on the spot with questions or try to make them repeat words, children may feel worried about making mistakes and be less likely to try next time.



Find out about favourite things:

- Observe the child during playtime, look at which specific toys is a child drawn to.
- Have a discussion with the child's parents and gain further information about the child's interests at home.
- In the child's preschool setting, include pictures of the child's favourite objects, places, pets and family members. This will support the child by feeling valued and creates an opportunity for children to feel inspired to initiate a chat about their interests.
- In the preschool setting, you can make a box filled with the specific objects or toys that a child likes to encourage conversation and make them feel safe.



Creating relaxed areas within the environment:

- Some children may feel overwhelmed by noisy and busy early years settings.
- It is important to ensure your space has cosy areas for children to feel safe, comfortable and relaxed.
- For example, creating a quiet reading corner in your setting for children to go to.
- Children are more likely to talk if they don't feel observed.



Encouraging noisy games:

- For some children, being confident to make a noise is an important step towards verbally communicating.
- Adults to begin to play with noisy musical instructions to encourage children to join in.
- For instance, the adult can begin to imitate animal sounds e.g. roaring sounds, practice making vehicle sounds (nee new), experience with different sound materials that make a splash/crunch.
- Going on noise walks are a good opportunity for the child to imitate the sounds they hear without using words.



Creating a communication supportive environment:

1. Adults to reinforce a positive environment within their preschool setting e.g. “Ali is not ready to talk at the moment and that is okay”.



2. Introduce alternative forms of communication e.g. use of a whiteboard so that the child can communicate with you via written communication.

3. Encouraging modelling of gestures within the environment to support communication. For instance, the adult may ask a child “how are you feeling?” the adult may model responses (thumbs up means your okay and thumbs down means you are sad).



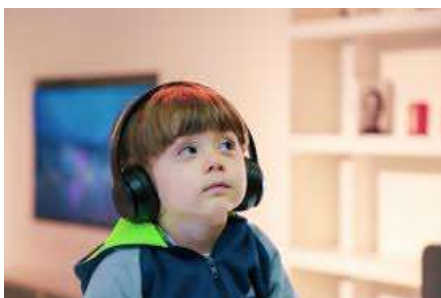
4. Reduce asking the child questions and instead comment on their play e.g. “What is this?”. The adult can model e.g. “You are rolling the yellow car”.

5. Preparing the child for transitions throughout the day e.g. visual timetables.



6. Encourage small group work to reduce pressure and introduce a trusted adult for a child to work with.

8. Include the child in activities within their preschool settings e.g. watering plants, handing out snacks.



9. Consider a child's sensory preference e.g. hypersensitivity towards noise, food smells and textures. It is important to address these whilst supporting communication development.

ABC Approach:

<p>A Reducing the child's anxiety</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the pressure on the child to speak. Make sure the child knows they will not be forced to speak in situations they are not comfortable with. • Do not show your anxiety and/or frustration to your child not speaking. • Acknowledge the difficulty and show you understand -you could say things like "it can be difficult to talk at school / nursery" and "you can talk when you're ready". • Reassure the child – you could say things like "lots of children find talking hard, you can get there with time". • Do not draw attention when the child does start to talk.
<p>B Building a child's confidence and self-esteem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on what they can do and give positive praise for good work or good things they have done (avoid giving specific praise for talking). • Give simple tasks and responsibilities – tidying up equipment, giving out snacks etc. • Ensure lots of access to small groups, with less stimulation, including noise. (Shipon-Blum, 2007) • Let the child know what is happening next, throughout the day/week and any changes to the routine, where possible.
<p>C Creating opportunities for your child to communicate and participate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include the child in small group activities, including a trusted peer where possible where the focus is not on speaking. • Provide plenty of opportunities throughout the day for the child to participate without the pressure to use spoken language. • Adapt activities so the child is able to participate by pointing, using gestures, taking a turn etc. • Avoid asking direct questions, particularly in group situations. • Ask rhetorical questions e.g. 'it's cold today, isn't it?' or 'that was fun, wasn't it?' • Make comments, such as 'I wonder..' or 'it's looks as though..' which may provoke a response but do not require one. • Encourage participation in noisy games and rhymes with predictable language e.g., joining in with a rhyme, repetitive language in stories, animal noises in play etc. • Unison activities such as singing, rhyming, clapping, reading & play with instruments and puppets.

Do's and Don't

How can you help	Things to avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do remove all pressure to speak and help the child feel as relaxed as possible. • Do tell the child they do not need to speak when interacting with them – focus on enjoyment and participation. • Do be patient – children want to speak but just cannot in certain situations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do accept strategies for communication e.g. using gestures, child telling other child the answer and letting other child answer for them, speaking in a quiet voice. • Do accept all forms of communication – ensure the child always has a way to participate e.g. during circle time, during the register, at snack time, during games. • Do inform and train all educational staff who will be working with the child, so that they can begin to implement a communication friendly environment • Do offer choices throughout the day to provide opportunities for communication e.g. hold out two snack choices (Banana or apple) and this allows the child to point/reach out for their preferred choice • Do use techniques such as ‘sliding in’ and ‘shaping’ as appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not ask a child with SM to speak or draw attention to their lack of speech. • Do not give the child specific attention e.g. singling out. • Do not tell a child off for not talking or act frustrated by their lack of talking (Remember: They are not being stubborn/defiant; they want to speak but just can't). • Do not ask the child any direct questions (this adds pressure/expectation to speak and increases anxiety). • Do not ask the child to verbally repeat instructions • Do not act surprised or praise the child if they talk to you (child is worried about the response they might get if they decide to speak). Later on, it might be beneficial to say, ‘you’ve been very brave today’, but without specifically referring to speaking. • Do not comment on the child’s silence e.g. ‘He’s really shy’, ‘She doesn’t talk’. • Do not force a child to speak in front of others either through offering rewards or through telling them off. • Do not ask the child to “speak up”.



Supporting Children with Selective Mutism in Early Years Settings: 'Sliding-in' Approach

Research suggests that it is most helpful if children with Selective Mutism are supported in those settings where the child is anxious about speaking. It highlights the importance of working collaboratively with the child's key adults in that setting.

The 'Sliding-in' technique is an intervention for supporting children who experience anxiety in relation to speaking in front of others. It is a step-by-step process which aims to reduce the child's anxiety about speaking and gradually encourages the child to speak to others, one person at a time.

Principles of "Sliding-in" Approach:

- Based on classic exposure therapy (e.g. arachnophobia treatment)
- Enables children to gradually tolerate being overhead and spoken to
- Start within the child's 'talking' comfort zone and slowly 'slide in' new talking partners at the child's pace
- Start with motivating, non-verbal activities e.g. colouring in, building a tower, board games.
- Move on to low-risk activities requiring some talking e.g. Bingo, who am I, battleships, singing or talking in unison.
- Choose an activity the child particularly enjoys e.g. free play with favourite toy, drawing, bubbles
- As appropriate for the child's age, tell them what you will be doing in the sessions (e.g. 'We're going to have a play together in the room' or 'we can gradually help you talk to one person at a time')
- Make sure you reiterate that the child is not expected to talk during the sessions e.g. 'you can talk as much or as little as you feel like'

Before getting started:

- ✓ Ensure that parents and all staff working with the child are aware of and using the general advice regarding Selective Mutism provided, before starting the ‘sliding-in’ approach. This includes ‘The pep talk’ e.g. each adult working with the child must have already acknowledged the difficulty with talking and taken the pressure off – ‘I know you find talking in front of others hard, don’t worry I won’t ever put you on the spot’
- ✓ Parents and setting to discuss who in the child’s environment they are most comfortable with / already talking to – this could be a key person, auxiliary staff or another child. If the child does not feel comfortable speaking to anyone in the setting, this might be a parent/relative.
- ✓ The ‘Key Person’ chosen to establish and generalise the child’s talking at the setting, spends 3 x 10mins with the child each week to support progress.
- ✓ Choose a quiet space where the child won’t be overheard and the session is highly unlikely to be interrupted and progress as outlined below.
- ✓ As appropriate for the child’s age, tell them what you will be doing in the sessions (e.g. ‘We’re going to have a play together in the room’ or ‘we can gradually help you talk to one person at a time’). Make sure you reiterate that the child is not expected to talk during the sessions e.g. ‘you can talk as much or as little as you feel like’
- ✓ Depending on how comfortable the child is with playing with/talking to the Key Person, the Key Person now begins the potentially very slow process of establishing a relationship with the child where they are comfortable to speak to them using single words/sentences/low cognitive demand answers/ spontaneous speech. Once this is established, at the child’s own pace, a new talking partner is gently ‘slid in’ e.g. through starting the slow process described below.

Example of ‘Sliding-in’ approach with parent as ‘familiar’ person and child’s chosen key person ‘sliding in’.

Review progresses every 3-4 weeks to check the child is making small amounts of progress.

3x sessions/week (10 mins each)	Goal
Step 1	Child and parent in a quiet space near the ‘classroom’ engaged in motivating activity needing minimal verbal response e.g. counting blocks when building a tower. No other people are present/nearby.
Step 2	Child and parent in quiet space knowing that key person is a short distance away, e.g. in the room next door, in the classroom.
Step 3	Child and parent in quiet space with key person even nearer e.g. outside the closed door.

Step 4	Child and parent engaged in preferred activity with key person outside the open door.
Step 5	Child and parent engaged in preferred activity with key person entering the room for a short time e.g. to pick something up from the room.
Step 6	Child and parent continue their activity while key person comes in and carries out an activity at a distance from the child for a few minutes while the child and parent continue their activity.
Step 7	Child and parent continue their activity with key person carrying out their own activity next to the child/at the same table.
Step 8	Child, parent and key person will all take turns at preferred game requiring limited verbal response e.g. counting (child can decide how much each person should count).
Step 9	Child, parent and key person move on to slightly longer utterances which should be agreed beforehand e.g. My name is... I like to eat... (The adults can start so child has a model. Again, child can decide what information is going to be given.)
Step 10	<p>Once the child is comfortable speaking with the key person then parent no longer needs to be present and the key person with the child can carry on with activities and introduce one new person at a time to the session (the child can have some say who joins in next, e.g. a favourite friend).</p> <p>In discussion with Key Person/ Parents/ Child (if appropriate for age), decide who to slide in and with which activity/game based on what has worked above and who the child might respond to best.</p> <p>With each new person 'sliding in' the process starts at Step 1 again and moves at the child's pace.</p>

N.B. Some children may not need every step and may be able to move from step 1 to step 4, the important thing is that the child is involved in setting the targets and these aren't changed. Three 10-minute sessions should be allocated per week, rather than one longer session.

N.B. Activities can be changed to make more verbal demands on the child, e.g. from rote counting/days of the week to completing sentences with 1 word to games involving a sentence, e.g. "I went to the shop..."

Reference: 'The Selective Mutism Resource Manual' by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens

Strategies for Early Years Settings to incorporate to support children with SM

 <p>match their language (e.g., use single words)</p>	 <p>use gestures/signs</p>	 <p>get down to their level</p>	 <p>follow their lead in play</p>	 <p>practise OWLing (observe, wait and listen)</p>	 <p>demonstrate</p>		
 <p>use songs/rhymes</p>	 <p>teach vocabulary through play and daily routines</p>	 <p>Strategies to support Speech and Language difficulties - early years</p>		 <p>comment on what they are doing, ask less questions</p>	 <p>build confidence, e.g., reduce pressure to communicate</p>		
 <p>model and rephrase language</p>	 <p>repeat back and add words</p>	 <p>Strategies to support Speech and Language difficulties - early years</p>		 <p>stick to a routine</p>	 <p>build a rapport (e.g., intensive interaction)</p>		
 <p>offer choices</p>	 <p>practise turn-taking and waiting skills</p>			 <p>give reasons to communicate (e.g., toys out of reach - opportunities to request / ask for help)</p>	 <p>honour all forms of communication</p>	 <p>wait for them to respond</p>	 <p>use pictures</p>

Additional Supports:

Websites:

SMIRA (Selective Mutism Information & Research Association):

<https://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/>

Books:

Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens.

Waltham Forest (All talk):

<https://thehub-beta.walthamforest.gov.uk/all-talk-project-resources>

All talk Email address:

Alltalk@nelft.nhs.uk