

Supporting a child with Selective Mutism

For a child with selective mutism, it is likely that a prolonged break from school and in socialising with teaching staff and peers due to the Covid-19 pandemic may result in a regression in their progress in regards to talking to others. This is a normal and expected response.

It is important to remember that Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder and not due to a child being defiant and that with the right approach and support, a child can make good progress. There are many things to consider which will help a child with Selective Mutism on the return to school following the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim should be to reduce the child's anxiety along with providing opportunities for a child to communicate.

For parents

- Acknowledge that your child has difficulty speaking and be patient, reassure your child that you know they will speak when they are ready to do so
- Do not put any pressure on your child to speak at school
- If others comment on the fact that your child does not talk at school reply by saying "My child doesn't talk at school yet, but I know they will do so when they are ready"
- If your child is comfortable having 'virtual playdates' with their friends or family, try to set these up regularly and if comfortable gradually increase the number of friends or family members involved in the playdate
- Prior to the return to school, set up a face to face playdate (if permitted) with a close friend of your child's, again if comfortable increase the number of children involved
- Ask your child if they feel comfortable with you recording their voice so that you can play it either to their class teacher or trusted member of staff only. This may begin with them simply saying 'hello' or 'yes/no' and can then progress to them doing some reading. This can be via audio recording or video but only if your child feels comfortable with this. You can try this with a friend or family member first if your child prefers.
- If your child is anxious about returning to school, try practising some relaxation exercises or guided meditation. There are many apps available which can support this such as 'Smiling Mind'.

For teaching staff

- Provide as much information to the child as possible as to any changes to classroom/school set-up prior to child returning to school e.g. use of photo/videos. This is particularly important for children who are experiencing a major transition such as nursery to P1.
- If possible, arrange a video call with the child's parent prior to the return to school and chat with the parent while the child is present. Try playing a game such as hangman or Pictionary with the family which will allow the child to communicate if they wish
- Acknowledge that the child has difficulty speaking and be patient, reassure the child that you know they will speak when they are ready to do so
- Do not put any pressure on the child to speak at school
- If another child comments on the child with SM not talking, say that they do not speak yet but you know they will do so when they are ready
- Engage the child through play, physical activity, craftwork, creative projects and games
- Make comments on what the child is doing rather than asking the child direct questions e.g. "I can see you are using the blue colouring pen"
- Encourage non-verbal interactions e.g. waving, smiling, nodding, making eye contact
- Provide opportunities for the child to speak using low pressured strategies such as offering a choice e.g. "do you want the blue or red pen?" and "I wonder where this one goes?" These give the child the option to respond verbally or non-verbally, e.g. pointing.
- Reward all efforts to communicate, no matter how small
- Ensure that you seek support from Educational Psychology so as a more formal approach such as the 'Sliding-in Technique' can be implemented if required.

Resources

For further information in regards to Selective Mutism, please see the following resources:

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzlhqoLZwNw>

<https://www.confidentchildren.co.uk/single-post/2020/03/21/Helping-children-with-Selective-Mutism-during-the-Coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/5843/selectivemutismpracticeguidelines.pdf>

(Aberdeenshire Council Guidelines)