

Starting at a new school

Changing school is stressful time for any child, whether it occurs as a result of moving house or is simply a transfer between the Key Stages. For children with Selective Mutism, the move can cause additional anxiety, but can also provide the opportunity to break out of an established behaviour pattern and role. Parents need to be especially aware of their child's fears and feelings and talk sensitively to them about the matter at home, reassuring them that most children and adults feel anxious about starting at and speaking in a new environment

A major transition like this needs to be carefully planned and schools generally arrange for new year groups to visit and meet their teachers before the end of the previous academic year. Parents may also be given such an opportunity, particularly when their child is starting Primary School or moving to Secondary School. Even if the change of school is the result of a re-location, schools are usually willing to show prospective parents and pupils around.

In order to help children, schools need as much information about them as possible, so it is vital that parents of SM children tell the school about this problem before the child starts attending the school. If possible, a visit should be arranged for a time when the school is empty, e.g. after school hours, when the parents and child can look round the building. This provides the opportunity for the child to 'take ownership' of the building, without having to face lots of social encounters at the same time. In this context, the child may have the confidence to speak to the parents and even some of the new staff, thus 'breaking the sound barrier' in the new environment. Using a camera or camcorder to take pictures of the new school at this time can also be a help, as these images can then be used at home for discussion and further familiarisation with the new setting.

If the child has a friend to whom they talk, who is also going to that school, an additional visit could be arranged for them to go together, in order to provide another opportunity for the child to speak in the new school. Even if this is not possible, another visit with the parents should be arranged during school hours, so that the child has the chance to encounter the working environment in the company of a trusted adult to whom they can talk freely.

Staff from the new school who will be working with the child could visit the home before the child starts, when a rapport can be established with the child in the context in which they feel most relaxed. If the child can speak to the staff in the 'safe' setting of the home, it is much more likely that they will talk to the staff in the school environment at a later date. More than one visit may be necessary to enable the child to be sufficiently confident to speak to the teacher in the home.

When speech is transferred to the school, the child may initially only feel able to talk to the teacher in an enclosed room, where they will not be overheard. Once the child is speaking confidently in that setting, then other people can be gradually introduced and other rooms used in order to build the child's confidence to talk in a range of environments within the school.

Acceptance, encouragement and support from the adults involved will help the child to overcome their anxiety and grow in confidence, as they meet and conquer the challenges of the new situation and this next phase of their life.