The Selectively Mute Child in School

The Teacher’s Response

Many teachers will never have encountered such a child before and may have no idea how to respond. Recognising that Selective Mutism is an anxiety response, similar to a phobia, may help the teacher to better understand the child.

Negative responses by the teacher can include:

• feeling threatened or frustrated at being unable to elicit a verbal response from the child
• modelling verbal responses, e.g. answering register, ‘over-talking’ for the child
• denying there is a problem or hoping it will clear up in time without any intervention
• pressuring, bribing, threatening, flattering or cajoling the child into speaking.

Positive responses by the teacher can include:

• removing the pressure to speak from child
• removing the pressure to make the child speak from yourself
• trying to help the child feel secure and accepted as they are at that time
• working hard to establish a rapport and a good relationship with the child
• accepting any non-verbal responses or attempts to communicate
• linking the SM child with a small group of peers and a key adult
• encouraging social interaction and physical movement through games
• letting the child know that other children and even adults fear speaking at times
• seeking outside help from agencies, e.g. SNTS, EPS, and support groups like SMIRA
• working with the parents to make a ‘bridge’ between home and school.
The Teacher’s Role

1. **Early identification**
   - the condition may be manifested in school settings and rooted in the child’s anxiety over speaking in unfamiliar social settings and to unfamiliar people
   - allow a ‘settling in’ period, but if the child is still not speaking even to peers after a term, action needs to be taken, because they will not “just grow out of it”
   - early treatment produces good results quickly, but a long established pattern of silence is harder to break and needs a highly structured programme

2. **Establishing a partnership with the child’s parents**
   - communication, honesty and trust are vitally important in learning about the child
   - visiting the child at home can help in transferring speech to the school setting
   - parents visiting school with child before entry, especially when the school is empty, can help the child to gain ‘ownership’ of the building before having to share it
   - tape/video of the child speaking at home can be brought to school, if the child agrees
   - friends from school visiting to play at home can also help in transferring speech.

3. **Effecting intervention**
   - assess child’s stage of communication, e.g. non-verbal, sounds, single words, phrases
   - plan a strategy to move the child on to the next stage
   - use Stimulus Fading* (‘sliding in’) technique, if a conversation partner is available for child
   - use Shading technique* if no existing conversation partner is available
   - use Interactive Therapy Group games with young children in school
References
