

SELECTIVE MUTISM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

- 1. Understand what Selective Mutism is.** Selective Mutism is defined as being the appropriate use of language in specific environments that the child deems as “safe”, with a consistent lack of speech in all other environments. It is often difficult to differentiate from “shy”.
- 2. Encourage the parent to bring a peer or two from the non-speaking atmosphere (e.g. school) to the speaking atmosphere (e.g. home).** Once the child has become comfortable speaking to those children, keep encouraging communication between the child and their peers in the non-speaking environment.
- 3. Remove gratification from non-speech communication.** Discourage the use of hand or head gestures for yes and no. Instead, suggest speech as the primary method for communicating.
- 4. Bring a “safe person” (someone who the child will speak to) to the non-speaking atmosphere.** Encourage family members, especially parents and siblings, to come to the non-speaking atmosphere (e.g. school). Have them engage in conversations and then sequentially remove the “safe person” from the non-speaking atmosphere.
- 5. Obtain support from other education and service providers.** When possible and appropriate, have other teachers and professionals assist you.
- 6. Obtain support from the family.** Encourage family therapy and keep the parents involved. Suggest that the parent come to the classroom to help with daily activities, go on field trips or assist with after-school activities.
- 7. Use self-modeling by means of video recordings.** Have the child repeatedly view themselves on videotapes that show the desired behaviors. Show the child what they did well and encourage these behaviors for future use.
- 8. Use mystery motivators in the classroom.** Mystery motivators are usually small hidden rewards which increase both anticipation and the value of reinforcement. An example would be to place a desired reward for the child in a manila envelope with their name and a question mark written on it. Make sure that the envelope is placed in a location where the entire classroom can view it. Then tell the class that the reward will be given to the child when the child asks for it in an audible tone. Make sure to do this for every child so that focus isn't placed on just the child with Selective Mutism.
- 9. Incorporate communication skills into the lesson plan.** Provide the child with tips on how to speak in front of others as part of a classroom exercise.
- 10. Remove threat from oral communication assignments.** Provide detailed directions along with specific format instructions. This will decrease some of the uncertainty from the assignment.

11. Provide reinforcement for communication attempts. Give the child a small reward or praise for making an attempt to communicate. Never punish or reprimand the child even if they provide an incorrect response to a query.

12. Know your students and keep the spotlight off of them. Interview each child and find out his or her interests, etc. Never call on the child and direct the entire classroom's attention on him or her. Instead, try to create a safe atmosphere which will foster communication.

13. Have the child write down his or her strengths and weaknesses. Encourage the child to write down what he or she believes their strengths and weaknesses are but never have them share it with peers or others. Use this as a reflection exercise.

14. Set small goals for the child and keep them reasonable. Help him or her create goals for communication which are both non-threatening and reasonable. For example, have the child ask one question per day and as their level of comfort increases, progressively increase the amount of questions.

Resources:

Brigham, F. & Cole, J.E. (1997). *Selective Mutism: Definition, Issues and Treatment*. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children, Salt Lake City, UT.

Giddan, J.J.; Ross, G.J.; Sechler, L.L. & Becker, B.R. (1997). Selective Mutism in elementary school: Multidisciplinary interventions. *Language, Speech, and Hearing in Schools*, 28 (2), 127-133.

Keyhole, T.J.; Madaus, M.R.; Baratta, V.S. & Bray, M.A. (1998). Augmented self-modeling as a treatment for children with selective mutism. *Journal of School Psychology*, 36(3), 247-260.

www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr267.shtml: How Teachers Can Help Shy Students

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