



Happy Talk's Top 10 Tips for Selective Mutism

1. The Pep Talk



It is really important that you are open and honest with your child about Selective Mutism. We can reduce a lot of anxiety just by talking to the child about it, so that you can let them know you understand and that they are not alone. You can say something like "I know you find talking really difficult at school, don't worry, you're not alone, other children feel this way too and I understand that it is so hard for you. When you go to school, you don't need to speak, I've spoken to the teachers, and they understand too. But it will get easier, and we are going to help you." This can be adapted depending on the age and needs of the child.

2. Avoid Pressure and Demands to Speak

Avoid putting pressure on the child to speak. Pressure increases the demands your child feels and in turn increases anxiety. Your child will then want to avoid that situation due to the uncomfortable feelings they have experienced. By getting rid of the pressure to speak, this will help your child's anxiety to reduce so that they feel more comfortable and happier. It will also increase their confidence to communicate in that setting.



3. Comment instead of Ask Questions

Question	Comment
What's that?	→ Ball! Throw the ball!
What are you eating?	→ Mmm apple! You like apples
Can you say car?	→ Car! Vroom vroom!

It is important to remember that a question is a demand to speak. Demands to speak for children with Selective Mutism cause a 'freeze' response. Instead of asking questions, you can comment e.g., "do you like cars?" → "oh I like cars, I like this car, its blue and its very fast."

If you do ask a question, you could ask a closed question that requires a yes or no answer, where the child could gesture. You could also start a question with 'I wonder if' e.g., "I wonder if you like playing with trains." This does not demand an answer but may elicit a response as there is no direct pressure to speak.





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4. Provide Alternative Means to Communicate

Provide alternative means to communicate through gesture, signing, pictures and visuals, drawing, typing, and writing. You can also offer choices and the child can point. This can be very personal to the child, and you can take time to find what works best. Using alternative methods of communication does not discourage the use of language, but aims to include them and increase their engagement and participation in daily activities.



5. Acknowledge Non-verbal Communication



It is important to acknowledge the child's non-verbal communication as if they had spoken. If they have gestured that they need the toilet, you can reply as if they had said it e.g., "of course you can go to the toilet. Lovely asking." If they do speak, it is important not to act surprised or comment as this will draw attention to them that may make them feel uncomfortable.

6. Reduce Eye Contact

Eye contact is an extra demand that we expect communication and a response. This makes a child with selective mutism feel uncomfortable and high levels of anxiety by putting pressure on them to speak. If you are playing with the child, you can both focus your eyes on the toy or item that you are playing with.



7. Provide Non-verbal Activities



Craft activities, physical activities, building and project work are all good examples of non-verbal activities that promote inclusion and participation. Often children with selective mutism desperately want to join in but find this difficult due to the worry that the activity may involve them needing to speak. Non-verbal activities help them to feel more relaxed and confident to participate.



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8. Build Confidence and Self-Esteem



Build confidence and self-esteem by praising the child with the things they do well that are not related to talking e.g., "well done you were really kind to your friend then." Some children with Selective Mutism find praise difficult as it puts more attention on them. Giving a sticker or thumbs up works well to let them know that they are doing well.

9. Small Steps

Once the child is feeling more comfortable and confident in the setting, it is important to provide 'just right' challenges and small steps that are at the child's pace. Going too quickly will cause the child to experience anxiety, whereas going at the child's pace will help them to explore outside of their comfort zone with increasing confidence. For example:

- 1) Being in the classroom with mummy and talking
- 2) Being in the classroom with mummy and teacher is outside the door
- 3) Being in the classroom with mum and teacher is in the doorway.



10. Share Information



Sharing information is key to ensure progress in children with Selective Mutism. This includes sharing the strategies with all adults around the child (family, friends, education setting) and ensuring they understand how to support a child with Selective Mutism. You can also start a communication diary between nursery/school and home and add pictures so that your child can show their teacher what they have done at home even if they are unable to use their words to tell them.

Get in Touch!



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