

Advice sheet for staff and parents of children who have selective mutism

TALKING TO THE CHILD ABOUT SPEECH ANXIETY – ‘THE PEP TALK’



Acknowledge the child's fear of speaking.

Let them know that you understand their difficulty and the feelings they experience when they try to speak. You know they want to and have tried to speak, but they feel so worried about talking that they tighten up and feel frozen – the words seem to get stuck in their throat. The language you use and the detail you give will depend on their age, but even very young children benefit from having their problem acknowledged rather than ignored, ‘hushed-up’ or misinterpreted.



Let the child know they are not alone.

Younger children need to know that there are plenty of other lovely children who find talking hard at first. For older children (just as for adults) it can be especially reassuring to be told that their condition has a name (selective mutism) and that other children their age have got through it. A calm, informed approach will inspire confidence!



Take the pressure off talking so that the child can relax, participate, enjoy and learn in all settings. Emphasise that there are lots of other ways to join in and have fun. Impress on the child that the most important thing is for them to be happy and relaxed. Tell the child that there is no rush and they can speak when they feel ready. Let them know that they have a friend in you to turn to, if they are feeling upset.



Explain that talking will get easier.

It is essential that the child sees themselves as a person who will talk at some time in the future and knows that you have confidence in them. Tell them you know they are not ready to talk yet but it will not always be like this; it will get easier and they will get braver. Emphasise that they only have to do things they can manage; and that by starting with things they find easy, they will gradually be able to do more and more until, one day, talking is really easy too. Even children as young as three years old can see the logic of this approach.

