

# **Encouraging Confident Communication AND Helping Children who are Reluctant to Talk**



**Calderdale Educational Psychology Service  
AND  
The Speech and Language Therapy Service**

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# Introduction

**“Communication is an essential part of our lives.”**

For children communication is vital in:

1. Socialisation at home and school.
2. Communicating their thoughts and needs.
3. Learning across all areas of the curriculum.

Some children have difficulties in aspects of communication. This can be because of problems producing clear, fluent speech, understanding language, or in using language.

Some children, however, are able to hear, listen to and understand language, are able to speak clearly and know how to use language but are reluctant to talk.

Some children may be shy or lack the confidence to talk in most situations whilst others are quite talkative in one place and are very quiet in others. Young children, for example, often find it difficult to separate from family members or carers when they start an Early Years setting for the first time and all children have to readjust when they start a new school or class; this is often a time when children are reluctant to talk.

Most children overcome this initial reluctance to talk and mix with others as they learn to trust the adults looking after them and get used to their new surroundings and any new people. Gradually, and with the help and support of nursery staff, school staff, parents, carers, older siblings and other children, they gain more confidence to talk, mix and join in. The people around them may reassure them if they are worried about things in their new setting, and the anxiety about communicating and participating usually goes away.

# Confident Communication

It is widely recognised that as children start preschool settings or Primary school, as they change classes or start a new school, they have to settle and gain confidence in taking part and communicating or interacting with others.

For younger children, this might mean separating from carers, getting to know the nursery or class environment and starting to play and take part in activities. Then it might mean beginning to talk to one other person, perhaps a trusted adult, other adults or some of the children.

For older children it might mean getting to know new surroundings and new people, getting used to new routines, making friends and contributing to discussions or activities in the class.

If this process of adapting to change and getting used to new people and places is successful, confident communication will generally follow for most children.

The following are some of the key points in supporting children to become confident communicators at school:

- Provide a secure, supportive environment for children in classes and settings.
- Give a positive response to children participating in activities.
- Welcome all appropriate verbal contributions in class.
- Try to avoid putting children “on the spot” unless you are confident they are able to handle it.
- Encourage a “have a go” attitude in your class where mistakes are not penalised. Consider admitting to your own mistakes sometimes to let children know that it is ok to make them.
- Give children TIME to make a response after a question or in a conversation.
- Allow for lots of different ways for children to join in class activities and give responses, for example:
  - showing a picture or whiteboard in response;
  - writing on the whiteboard instead of speaking;
  - acting out a response;
  - allow children to select from a set of alternative responses (these could be verbal responses, written words, objects or pictures);
  - allow paired listening and responding.

# Reluctant Communication

For a small group of children reluctance to communicate becomes more persistent and difficult to overcome and they may need additional strategies to help them. This difficulty may range from:

- Children who are reluctant to speak in some situations but will do so.
- Children who are very quiet or perhaps use only short phrases (even though they are able to use longer ones).
- Children who have elements of mutism where they are silent some of the time.
- Children who are selectively mute (see below).

## The Stages of Confident Speaking

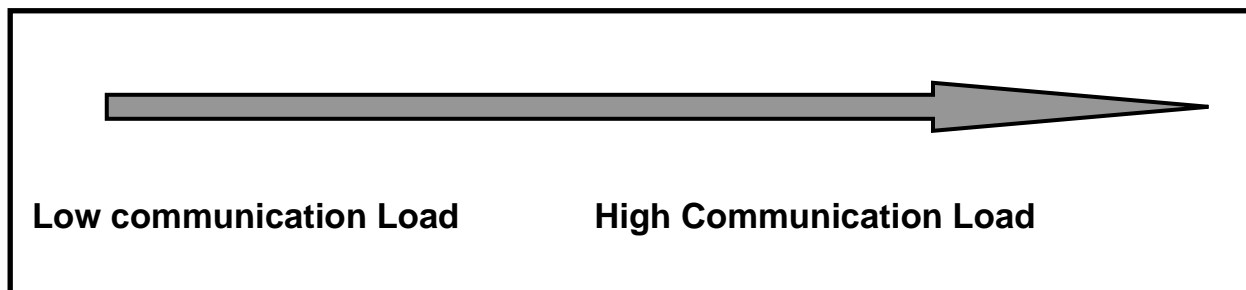
Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens (see the Selective Mutism Resource Manual, 2001) talk about different stages of confidence in speaking. This is a useful model to help understand the children we may be working with:

- Stages one to ten describe the continuum from non-communication and non-participation to full and free communication and participation.
- Children may move up and down during the course of any one day or other period of time.
- Children may move up and down in response to different situations or with different people in the setting.

<b>Stages of Confident Speaking</b>	
<b>Stage 1</b>	The child does not communicate or participate.
<b>Stage 2</b>	The child cooperates but limited communication.
<b>Stage 3</b>	The child communicates through visual, non-vocal means.
<b>Stage 4</b>	The child uses sound non-verbally e.g. laughs or joins in sound effects.
<b>Stage 5</b>	The child speaks within earshot of person but not directly to them.
<b>Stage 6</b>	The child uses single words with targeted person/ people.
<b>Stage 7</b>	The child uses connected speech with targeted person/ people.
<b>Stage 8</b>	The child begins to generalise to a range of people.
<b>Stage 9</b>	The child begins to generalise to a range of settings.
<b>Stage 10</b>	The child communicates freely.

## Communication Load

A key strategy to help reluctant talkers is to be aware of the communication load. It is better to expect reluctant children to use a low communication load and gradually build up their confidence.



<b>LOW COMMUNICATION LOAD</b>	<b>HIGH COMMUNICATION LOAD</b>
This is where children use:	This is where children are expected to give:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rote language.</li><li>• Well-remembered songs or rhymes, especially when sung or spoken in unison.</li><li>• Giving an economical yes/ no answer.</li><li>• Responding where there is <u>no</u> risk of getting it wrong.</li><li>• Elicited/ structured speech, for example where children give part of the answer to a question. "Sophie's dress is... (child names the colour)".</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responses where there may be alternative answers.</li><li>• Responses where they have to state reasons for things.</li><li>• Opinions/ ideas.</li><li>• Responses when they may be unsure if an answer is acceptable or not.</li><li>• Initiated/ unplanned speech.</li></ul>

## Making interaction positive

- Create the right environment where talk is welcome and as unpressured as possible.
- Help to build children's confidence through success and acknowledgement of their contributions.

## Create the right environment

- Raise shared awareness.
- Understand the child's anxiety.
- Remove all pressure to speak but ensure that all associations with communication are positive.
- Acknowledge the child's difficulties and keep them in proportion.
- It may be helpful to allow the child to develop a special relationship with one adult.

## Early Intervention

It is important to intervene early in order to support children who are genuinely reluctant to communicate. The section above has ideas about encouraging "confident communication". Reluctance to speak is more common with younger children.

## A note on volume

- **Do** allow a child to use a quiet voice as part of a small steps programme. Encourage a child to feel the difference in vibrations on your neck between whisper and full volume talking, play blind-fold or barrier games where lip-reading is not possible, so verbal communication needs to be audible.
- **Don't** encourage too much whispering during activities – this can strain the vocal apparatus. It is okay for the child to use a whisper voice at times other than in group or 1:1 time working on targets until they are more confident at using a stronger voice. Generally, any form of communication that a child uses, for example in their play, should always be rewarded.

## Activities to increase confidence and independence

- Use loud instruments in music, encouraging communication through the instruments.
- Encourage the child to move further away from the wall or teacher in hall sessions.
- Increase artistic expression through creative work.
- Encourage use of bigger, stronger actions or roles in mime, movement or dance.
- Provide extra opportunity to practice on climbing apparatus in hall or playground.

- Give the child jobs and responsibilities.
- Encourage the child to run errands, with another child at first.
- Use puppets in play or drama.
- Participation in noisy group activities – singing, chanting, vocalising as animals.
- Do things with, rather than for the child, ensuring that the child is the one to complete the task.
- Build relationships with peers and adults, for example by keeping the other children included in small group activities consistent.
- Use a gesture to accompany responses for all children in the class, the child then has a means of contributing to activities other than using spoken language. Encouraging all children to use the gesture as well as give a verbal response ensures the child is not singled out.

## **Children with other Speech, Language and Communication Needs**

Many schools use effective interventions to support children with speech, language and communication needs. The “Spirals” early communication groups have been very effective. Children who have difficulties with the social aspects of communication will benefit from taking part in a Social Communication and Interaction Training group (this incorporates many aspects of the “Social Use of Language Programme” which is also very useful).

Information about training for staff in schools about using “Spirals” groups and other groups is available from the Speech and Language Therapy Service.

If you feel a child has speech, language or communication needs, please refer to either the "Support Pack for Schools" or the "Support Pack for Early Years" provided by the Speech and Language Therapy Service for referral guidance. All schools should have a copy of these. These packs also contain useful strategies and activities to try. The Speech and Language Therapy Service have a range of training opportunities for school staff and for parents. Please refer to the Speech and Language Therapy Training Leaflet for more details. You can contact the SALT service for more information on Halifax 305561.

The Educational Psychology service is able to offer advice and support for parents, other professionals and staff in schools and early years settings regarding children with language, learning as well as social, emotional, behavioural and other difficulties. The service has a range of booklets offering advice and information and runs local consultation sessions in many venues around Calderdale. Contact the service on Halifax 392592.



# **Bilingualism and Reluctant Talkers**

## **Bilingualism and English as an Additional Language: Some Definitions**

“Children who live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use two or more languages at home and at school. It does not mean that they have fluency in both languages or that they are competent and literate in both languages”.

There are several different ways in which a child may become bilingual. Sequential bilingualism refers to the process in which a child learns one language after they have developed basic skills in their 1<sup>st</sup> language. For example: a child is exposed to just one language at home until they attend nursery or school. They have developed appropriate skills in their home language before they enter the school setting. On entry to school, they are now exposed to English as second language.

Simultaneous bilingualism is when a child is exposed to more than one language from birth. The child is therefore learning two languages simultaneously. It is not uncommon for the child's language development to be up to 6 months delayed due to the natural demand on the language system.

### **Silent period**

“When everyone around the child is speaking a different language, there are only two options: to speak the language they already know or to stop speaking altogether” (McLaughlin, B. Gesi Blanchard, A. Osanaieaking, Y. “Assessing Language Development in Bilingual pre-school Children”). When a bilingual child enters the nursery/school setting they may initially use their home language with all new people, whether they also speak the home language or not.

Many children refuse to speak the new language for a period of time. A silent (or receptive) period is natural for many children when acquiring an additional language. This is often a way of ‘taking in’ the language, figuring out how it works and developing skills in responding appropriately to instructions in that language. This can be seen in pre-school settings and foundation stage level particularly for children who have been exposed to one language at home, and then on entry to an educational setting are exposed to another (sequential bilingualism).

Another reason for the silent period may be that the child does not want to start speaking in the new language until he feels ready and confident that s/he can do it well. The child may prefer to communicate through non-verbal means and this can last up to 6 months. It can sometimes take children up to 2 years to develop basic verbal communication skills in an additional language for use at school.

It is however important to establish whether the child is going through the silent period or if there are other reasons why they do not use the new language in school. This period should not be confused with 'reluctant talker / selective mutism'; however, this period should be monitored. If the silent period lasts more than 6 months, further investigation may be necessary.

## **Next Stages**

Following the 'silent period', the child should then start to use simple phrases followed by longer, more complex sentences. As the child becomes more competent, they may use their new language more than their home language, possibly even when spoken to in their home language.

In the process of new language learning, the child may switch between their home language and the new language when talking. This may be alternating sentences or may be *within* sentences. This is referred to as *codeswitching*. It is a normal process of bilingual expressive language learning and should not be discouraged.  
(Stow, C. 2008)

## **Selective Mutism**

For a few children reluctance to talk in one or more situation can be a lasting problem that requires a more structured approach. These children may sometimes be selectively mute.

### **Information about Selective Mutism**

#### **Selectively mute children:**

- Want to speak but are unable to because they are afraid or anxious, for example.
- Become afraid of the act of speaking and people hearing their voices.
- Become increasingly wary of any form of communication which could lead to an expectation to speak.
- In time learn to avoid distress by avoiding communication.

## **What is Selective Mutism?**

*“Persistent failure to speak in specific social situations despite being able to speak in other, more familiar situations....”*

- Duration of at least one month beyond first month at school or nursery.
- Not due to lack of knowledge of or comfort with the language.
- Cannot be better explained by a communication disorder or any other abnormality.

## **Different types of Selective Mutism**

- Reluctant speakers who have elements of mutism.
- Children with “pure” Selective Mutism.
- Children who have Selective Mutism plus a Speech and Language Impairment.
- Complex Selective Mutism where children have other major concerns as well.

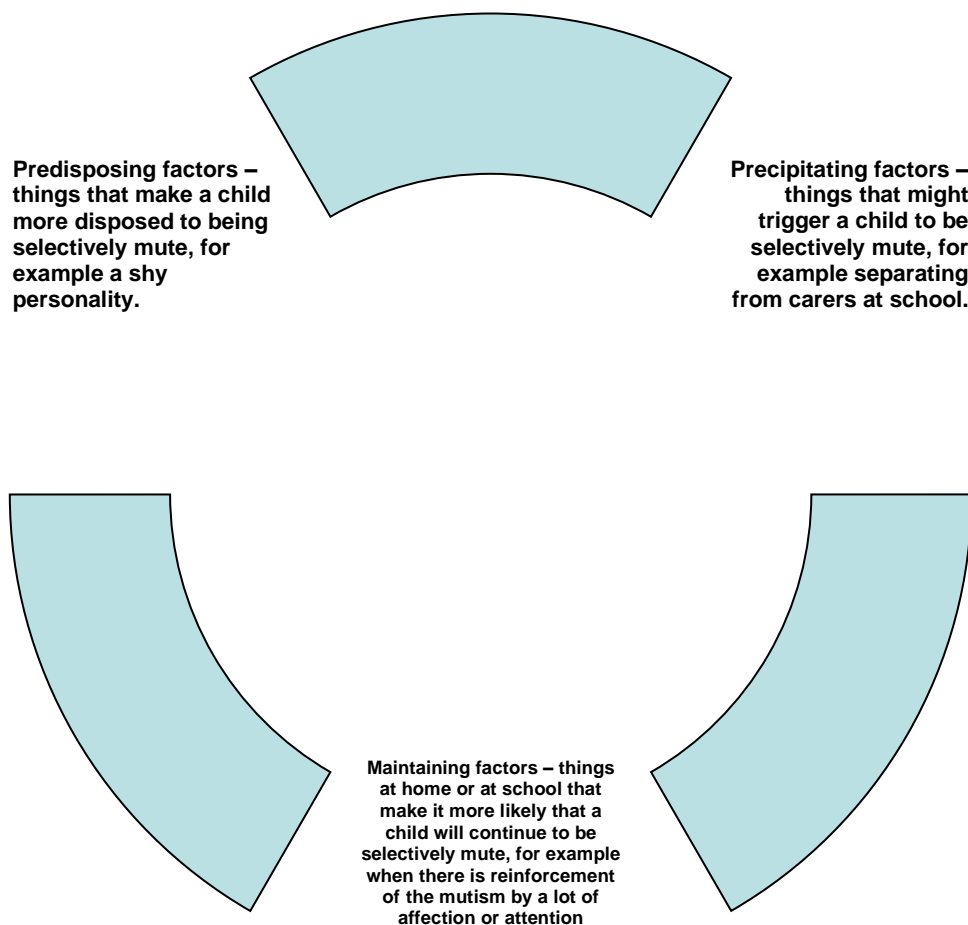
## **When is selective mutism noticed?**

- Most frequently reported age of onset is 3-5 years.
- Sometimes there is a slow development from shyness to persistent selective mutism.
- More girls than boys have selective mutism.

## **Which children are affected?**

- Quite rare: 1 in 500 children.
- Incidence higher in isolated communities or when there is a big cultural change in the new setting.
- About half of these children have other difficulties with Speech and Language as well.

## Factors that affect Selective Mutism



- Predisposing factors – it may be very difficult to change a child's background experience or their personality.
- Precipitating factors – this could include a difficult early experience such as a traumatic separation from parents when starting a pre-school setting or school. It could also include other traumas.
- Maintaining factors – these are the factors that nursery and school staff are most able to help with.

## Ways to help a child with Selective Mutism

If you are unsure how to help a child with Selective Mutism, you should consult with the Speech and Language Therapy Service or the Educational Psychology Service. These services may be able to offer:

- Advice and support.
- An information workshop for key staff.
- Specific programmes for individual children, which school staff can deliver.

The following are general approaches that should help the child:

- Establish a baseline of the child's communication at home or at school – record who, when, where and how the child talks or does not talk.
- Acknowledge the difficulty – whatever the age.
- Create an environment at home and school which rewards communication not silence.
- Use a “Small steps” intervention programme.
- Generalise speech to other people and places including the wider community.
- Social skills, confidence building and assertiveness-training as appropriate.
- Don't intervene directly unless absolutely necessary.
- Ensure a united consistent approach with all the staff working with the child.
- Face the fear – change one small thing at a time, work through the stages of confident speaking, gradually increasing the “communication load” at each stage.

### **Acknowledging the difficulty with the child**

- You are not alone.
- I understand how it feels.
- There is a reason why you feel this way and things that can help.
- This is how we do it – tiny steps.
- We move when you are ready.
- We can stop if you feel uncomfortable.
- It won't always be like this.

### **Eliciting speech with a key worker**

- Shaping programme – gradually shape the speech of an individual from least communication to free communication – use to build initial relationship with a key worker.
- Stimulus fading or sliding-in technique if there is a conversational partner to help – this means that a second person very gradually “slides in” to the conversation with the trusted conversational partner.
- Desensitisation (use of audio or video recording).
- For older children automatic telephone answering services can be helpful as part of a programme, for example where a person has to leave a message or say a word without actually speaking to anyone.
- Combination of the above.

## **Other techniques**

- Generalisation to other people and places – change one factor at a time – fade in others, fade out parents, change locations.
- Talking circle – this is an extension of the sliding-in technique.
- Walkabout – continue talking to trusted conversational partner whilst moving around school.
- Paired reading has been shown to be very useful with children who are reluctant talkers and readers.

## **Resources**

- Selective Mutism Resource manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, (Speechmark 2001).
- Yahoo groups – may be useful for professionals, parents or young people.
- Talking photo albums.
- Talking toys – repeating talking toy ([www.nauticalia.com](http://www.nauticalia.com)).
- “Nintendogs” - talk to dog to make it perform.
- Language Master.
- Taskmaster – social posters.
- Rapid Reading software – [www.myprimary.co.uk](http://www.myprimary.co.uk).
- Paired Reading information (available from the Educational Psychology Service).