

A guide when working with

children who have selective mutism

What is selective mutism?

Children who have selective mutism have developed a specific fear of talking to certain people. They can talk happily and freely to anyone in an inner talking circle – usually a few close friends and family members with whom they feel comfortable – but find themselves frozen and unable to speak to anyone else. This fear has nothing to do with being treated badly or their personal feelings.

Children with selective mutism are often desperate to please their teachers or grandparents, for example, but still find it impossible to get their words out. The more we put pressure on them to talk, the greater their discomfort, so the more they dread and try to avoid talking all together.

How can you help?

This fear develops in the same way as any other phobia and can be overcome through openness, understanding, reassurance and support to gradually face the fear in exactly the same way that we would help children work through other childhood fears – one small step at a time, at the child's pace.

- Tell the child it's okay just to have fun and to laugh, or join in with group singing until they feel better about talking – no-one minds if they don't talk straightaway. Do not try to rush them into talking.
- Value all attempts to join in and communicate in other ways, through pointing, drawing, nodding, using something which makes a sound, such as a rattle, miming etc.
- Do not encourage avoidance by allowing children to miss lessons, parties, outings, or eating in the school dining room, for example, as this will make their fear grow stronger. Instead, find ways to make the situation manageable, such as accompanying them, going early and just staying for a short time, and reassuring them that they will not be chosen to answer a question unless they volunteer.
- Ensure that everyone is on board and helps in the same way. Agree and write down goals and strategies and review and update this plan regularly.

Where to get help?

The only way to help children overcome a fear is to support them consistently, on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, the best people to help are family members and the staff who get to know the children well at school, nursery and through community activities. Outside specialists are rarely in a position to give this day-to-day support, but are able to provide advice and encouragement.

The Speech and Language Therapy Department offers regular training and information days. This is often all you need to turn things around. For further information please contact us.

When to refer children who have selective mutism to speech and language therapy?

You are welcome to seek a referral for further speech and language therapy support if:

- you are concerned that your child has additional difficulties with speech, language or communication development – you've noticed they have some difficulty understanding what you say or expressing themselves, even within their comfortable inner circle
- you have attended a training day, but cannot reach agreement about the nature of the child's difficulties or appropriate strategies to help
- you have tried to implement a programme at school or nursery but little or no progress is being made.

If in doubt, seek help.

Training

For dates and a booking form please email kchft.sltadmin-east@nhs.net

Contact us

Please contact the Children's Therapies Department if you have any queries or concerns regarding the information in this leaflet.

Visit: www.kentcht.nhs.uk/thepod

East | Green Banks, Westfield Road, Margate CT9 5PA
0300 123 8112 or 0300 042 0871

West | Heathside Centre, Invicta House, Heath Road, Coxheath, Maidstone ME17 4AH
01622 742326

North | Children's Resource Centre, Darent Valley Hospital, Darent Wood Road, Dartford DA2 8DA
01322 428242

Do you have feedback about our health services?

Phone: 0300 123 1807
8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday
Text: 07899 903499
Email: kentchft.PALS@nhs.net
Web: www.kentcht.nhs.uk/PALS

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust
Unit J, Concept Court
Shearway Business Park
Folkestone
Kent CT19 4RG

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