Supporting children who are reluctant to talk
Please click on the tabs below for worksheets and additional resources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tab</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Activities at Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Skills Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources to help at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech and Phonological Processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual support for maths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults' use of Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication TAs Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as an additional language resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is Reluctant Talking?

Other terms include:

• Selective mutism
• Selective talking

“Persistent failure to speak in specific social situations despite being able to speak in other more familiar situations”
What is Reluctant Talking?

This inconsistent pattern of talking is an **anxiety disorder** whereby:

• the child speaks happily and freely in some situations, but not in others
• the inconsistency has been apparent for a month or more
• the disorder is not better explained by another communication or language learning difficulty
• the inability to speak in certain situations is limiting academic or social functioning.
Incidence:

- Roughly 1 child in 140 at primary school is a reluctant speaker, more at preschool and less at secondary.
- Most primary schools and secondary schools will have at least one reluctant speaker on roll, but the children will not always have been identified.
- Girls are affected at least as frequently as boys, slightly more in some studies.
- Reluctant speaking is up to 4 times more prevalent in migrant and multi-lingual families.
Reluctant Speakers:

- Want to speak but feel they are unable to do so
- Become afraid of the act of speaking and people hearing their voices
- Become wary of any situation which could lead to an expectation to speak
- In time learn to avoid communication to avoid the anxiety it causes
Identification:

• The mean age of onset is early, 2.7 to 4.1 years when the child begins to experience different social settings.

• It can be triggered at any age from pre-school to teens. The actual onset can be missed, however, as silence is often accepted in young children as shyness.

• Later onset at primary or secondary school is usually triggered by an incident involving actual or perceived teasing, bullying or humiliation from teaching staff or peers.
Reluctant talking is on the increase – why?
• Anxiety conditions in children are now more common and experts suggest that this is linked to the increased stress in their daily lives.
• There is also increased pressure on settings to get children talking in order to meet educational targets.
• Lockdown has had an effect on children’s social opportunities
Predisposing factors: factors within the child

- Personality traits:
  - Shyness
  - Perfectionism
  - Sensitivity
  - Finds challenge hard to cope with
- Family History of shyness, reluctance to speak and anxiety
- Speech and language difficulties
- English spoken as an additional language
Precipitating Factors:

What triggers it?

• Entrance to school or nursery
• Unexpected change in family circumstances
• Awareness of cultural or social difference
• Speech difficulties
• Teasing or other negative reactions
Maintaining Factors: What keeps it going?

• Silence is accepted but only after the child has “had a go”
• Child feels the expectation to speak e.g. “Are you ready to talk to me yet?”
• Rewards are in place for what the child might do rather than what they actually do e.g. child is allowed to bring a toy to nursery to “help” them speak but they don’t actually speak
• Always a large audience – few small group opportunities
• Culture of the group e.g. “he doesn’t talk!”
• Breakdown of trust e.g. recordings shared without consulting child
• Over reaction to any attempts to talk
Stages of confident speaking:

1. No communication or participation
2. Co-operates but limited communication
3. Communicates through non-verbal means
4. Uses non-verbal sounds e.g. laughs
5. Speaks near (but not directly to) a person
6. Uses single words with selected people
7. Uses connected speech with selected people
8. Begins to generalise talking to a range of people
9. Begins to generalise talking in a range of settings
10. Communicates freely

Download as a PDF
## Stages of confident speaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1     | No communication or participation  
Passively accepts help e.g. stands still while coat is done up but makes no attempt to seek assistance |
| 2     | Co-operates but limited communication  
Complies with requests which are perceived as non-threatening e.g. gives out worksheets but won’t copy actions |
| 3     | Communicates through non-verbal means  
e.g. Responds by nodding/shaking head or writing |
| 4     | Uses non-verbal sounds  
e.g. laughs audibly |
| 5     | Speaks near (but not directly to) a person  
e.g. will talk to parents in same room as teaching assistant |
| 6     | Uses single words with selected people  
e.g. Responds to questions with limited information or yes/no answer |
| 7     | Uses connected speech with selected people  
e.g. able to talk to certain adults provided they feel no-one else is listening |
| 8     | Begins to generalise talking to a range of people  
e.g. talks normally at home in front of visitors |
| 9     | Begins to generalise talking in a range of settings  
e.g. talks to selected adults in different parts of the school when others can hear them |
| 10    | Communicates freely  
e.g. contributes to class discussions |

---

Suzy is 3 and will physically join in any activity given her and completes tasks but won’t initiate any communication and doesn’t ask for help.
## Stages of confident speaking

<table>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Oliver is 2 and will speak to his sister who is in another room at the same setting. He will also talk to another boy in the same room that he sees outside of nursery because their mums are friends. He plays with the other children but won’t use his voice with them.
# Stages of confident speaking

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| 10    | Communicates freely  
        e.g. contributes to class discussions |

Aria is 4 and will speak to the leader of the breakfast club but won’t speak to the nursery teacher.
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| 10 | Communicates freely  
e.g. contributes to class discussions |

Charlie is 4 and won’t let go of his mum. He has not spoken to anyone else and won’t join in any activities. He sits in the book corner by himself.
## Stages of confident speaking

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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  e.g. talks to selected adults in different parts of the school when others can hear them |
| 10| **Communicates freely**  
  e.g. contributes to class discussions |

Millie is 3 and talks to her key worker and to the other children but when her key worker was off sick she would not talk to the person covering for her.
When to seek help?

• Use appropriate strategies as soon as reluctance to speak is noticed
• Share concerns with setting’s Senco if the behaviour persists for longer than a month (unless it is the first month in a new setting)
Reluctant talking and other disorders

69% of children or young people who have a diagnosis of selective mutism also have a co-existing disorder:

- Communication disorders 50%
- Speech sound disorder 42%
- Developmental coordination disorder 17%
- Asperger 7%
## What (NOT!) to say to a reluctant speaker!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Try not to...</th>
<th>If you say....</th>
<th>They will think...</th>
<th>Instead you could try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignore their anxiety</td>
<td>It’s fine - You can talk to us just like you do at home!</td>
<td>No one understands how it feels! What is wrong with me?</td>
<td>Everyone feels a bit nervous with new places and people. It’s ok. You can still have a good time here!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join in!</td>
<td>It makes me sad when you don’t talk to me</td>
<td>I must be REALLY bad if I am making my teacher sad.</td>
<td>I know it’s hard for you to talk here at the moment... this is what we can do to help..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bribe them!</td>
<td>If you talk today you can have one of my special stickers</td>
<td>That sounds really scary. If I get a sticker everyone will look at me.</td>
<td>Show me what you would like to play with today..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predict the worst!</td>
<td>I know you won’t want to do this activity....</td>
<td>That means I can stay quiet and not join in.</td>
<td>Let’s think of the best way for you to join in this game!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creating the right environment

• Make sure there is a consistent approach – e.g. all staff should be using the same strategies

• Have a mixture of responsibilities in the group so that children can contribute both verbally and non-verbally

• Reinforce risk-taking rather than risk-avoidance. Do things with rather than for the child
Creating the right environment

Remove all pressure to speak:

• Provide opportunity not expectation
• Cajoling, gentle persuasion, bribes and reprimands all amount to pressure
• Provide alternative forms of communication for the whole group that the child can use until they are ready to speak e.g. toilet passes
• Never remove all need to communicate
With younger children...

- Provide special non-demanding play time with a trusted adult
- Create opportunities to make noise in other ways e.g. use louder instruments in music
- Provide lots of opportunities for whole group to join in familiar rhymes, counting activities and sequences accompanied by actions
- Extra encouragement or practice with challenging PE/playground equipment to build confidence
The sliding in approach:

• This approach aims to move the child through the stages of confident talking
• Staff must work in partnership with someone that the child is comfortable talking to. This might mean a family member coming to the setting or a key worker going to the home
• The child is part of the intervention and small steps are agreed with them at each stage
## Intervention through the stages of confident speaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No communication or participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Co-operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Non-verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Non-verbal sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Talking near a new person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Single words to a new person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sentences to a new person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Talking with more new people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Talking in a different place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Communicates freely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Stage 1**: Rapport building between child and key worker with no expectation on talking.
- **Stage 5**: Use parent or other family member to help child tolerate key worker presence during talking.
- **Stage 6**: Talking established with key worker starting with activities with low communicative load.
- **Stage 8**: Key worker brings other people into the same setting with the same activity.
- **Stage 9**: Same activities repeated with the same people in a different place.
- **Stage 10**: Emphasis on contributing in real-life settings.
Working through the stages of confident talking:

• Reduce communicative load when moving on to each new stage

• Negotiate a hierarchy with the child and start with the situation where they are MOST comfortable talking

• Increase the communicative load OR change the situation but never both at the same time

• Including very challenging scenarios in your hierarchy makes intermediate steps less scary
# Communicative load

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of talking:</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> Rote Language</td>
<td>Counting; days of week; alphabet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong> Familiar responses</td>
<td>e.g. yes/no/I don’t know Repetitive story responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong> No risk of being wrong</td>
<td>Naming familiar objects or people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong> Structured or elicited speech</td>
<td>Sentence completion tasks Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong> Choosing from alternatives</td>
<td>e.g. “do you like football or cricket best?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6</strong> Giving opinions</td>
<td>“What is your favourite lesson in school?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7</strong> Guessing and prediction</td>
<td>e.g. “what do you think will happen next”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8</strong> Spontaneous talking</td>
<td>Having a conversation!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case study - Bella

- Referred in Reception
- Reluctant to speak since starting school
- Moderate language delay
- Would whisper to other children
- Not speaking to any adults
- Middle child of three girls
- Normal communication at home
Bella’s hierarchy:

1. Home
2. Grandparents
3. With Therapist at school with door shut
4. With Therapist and another child with door shut
5. With Therapist at school with door open and teacher outside
6. With Therapist at school with door open and teacher in the room
7. With Therapist at school with door open and teacher in the room and joining in game
Bella’s hierarchy:
8. Talking to teacher on my own
9. Reading to my teacher
10. Reading with my teacher with TA nearby
11. Talking to my teacher on the playground
12. Talking to my TA when she helps in class
13. Talking to my teacher when it is register time
14. Talking to my teacher at carpet time
15. Talking to a different teacher
16. Talking to the Head Teacher
17. Answering questions in assembly
Other strategies

• Use talking tins etc between home and setting but you MUST negotiate this with the child and let them be responsible for sharing it

• Use cue cards for non verbal communication – available to everyone

• Be explicit with the rest of the group. If they ask why the child does not talk then explain in front of them that some children don’t like to talk when there are lots of people around or when they are not at home with their mum. Explain that the child can talk at home and you hope that they will be able to do that at nursery/school too soon.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I need the toilet</th>
<th>I need a drink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Toilet Icon]</td>
<td>![Drink Icon]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Can you say it again please?</th>
<th>I need some help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Conversation Icon]</td>
<td>![Help Icon]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transitions:

• Even when a child or young person has made good progress, transitions are likely to be challenging.

• Liaise closely with a key worker in the new setting

• Use principles of the sliding in technique if necessary

• Be explicit with the child that staff have been given this information. Knowing they will not be put under pressure to talk will reduce anxiety
www.hacw.nhs.uk/childrensSLT

resources
**Transition questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>will be my teacher?</td>
<td>are my teachers?</td>
<td>is in the same class as me?</td>
<td>will take me and collect me?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will be my teaching assistant?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will be in my class?</td>
<td></td>
<td>do we eat lunch?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will collect me from school?</td>
<td></td>
<td>do I put my coat and lunchbox?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>do I do when I get to school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>are the rules in class?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>do I do at home time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All about me...

When we go to school we meet lots of new people. It is useful for them to know some things about you. Here are some ideas that you can tell them!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A game I like to play:</th>
<th>A place I like to go:</th>
<th>These people live in my house:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I like to eat:</th>
<th>My birthday is:</th>
<th>I am really good at:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My favourite things...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When we go to school we meet lots of new people. You can tell them your favourite things. Don’t forget to ask them about their favourite things too!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My favourite thing to watch:</th>
<th>My favourite food:</th>
<th>My favourite colour:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My favourite song:</th>
<th>My favourite animal:</th>
<th>My favourite toy:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is me!

Can you draw a picture of yourself to give to your Teacher?

My New School

What can you find out about your new school? Take photographs or draw the answers below. Take a walk or drive to school or look on the school website to help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will you walk or drive?</th>
<th>How many roads do you walk or drive down?</th>
<th>What colour is the fence?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Walk" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Road" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Fence" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What picture is on the school sign?</th>
<th>How many gates can you see? Which one will you use?</th>
<th>What can you see in the playground?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Sign" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Gates" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Playground" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**My school bag**
Can you draw all the things you need to take to school?

**My school clothes**
Can you draw your new school uniform? Can you add a photo of your face?

**My lunch**
Can you draw all the things you would like in your lunch box?

♥ What is your favourite thing to eat for lunch?

♥ What do you like best about your uniform?
For more information:
http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual –
Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens (2016)
Any Questions?

jacquelinewoodcock@nhs.net

l.spooner@nhs.net

Worcestershire Speech and Language Therapy

Closed facebook group – Worcestershire Communication TAs

SLT_Worcs