

An advice sheet for parents of children who have selective mutism

DO I ANSWER FOR MY CHILD?

The short answer is 'No!'

It's natural to step in when your child freezes after being asked a question. But if they get used to someone answering for them, they will adopt the role of silent partner whenever that person is around. One day, your child *will* answer and it's so important to have everything in place for that moment when they are ready to speak out.

A few Golden Rules:

Don't answer for your child. If you adopt the routine overleaf, your child will learn that it's not so bad to be asked a question; everyone seems relaxed about it, whether they answer or not. They will be far less wary of social situations in general.

Don't put your child under pressure to answer. Calmly convey that it's fine if they answer and fine if they don't. You know they're trying hard and doing their best.

Don't apologise for your child. They'll feel they've done something wrong. If appropriate, you can explain to the person later that your child wasn't being rude, or share how it makes you feel that others don't see your child as they really are.

But now for the long answer ...

Follow the routine overleaf whenever someone asks your child a question and you'll be surprised how much easier it gets and how quickly your child succeeds in answering. If your child speaks very quietly, don't ask them to speak louder. Ask the person waiting for an answer, 'Did you get that?' They will often take a guess and your child can then nod or shake their head. And remember - although you are not going to answer for your child again, it's fine for you to repeat what they say!

It's not usually necessary to tell younger children what you're doing or why. But if they ask, or you want to prepare an older child, see the explanation below.

Why does this work? Your child will learn, *without any pressure*, that:

- ★ questions are for the person who's been asked – no one else will answer
- ★ you know they will get good at answering if they keep trying
- ★ *it's not a big deal* if they don't manage it – no-one minds, it's still a good day!



- 1 **Wait** for a full five seconds (slowly count to five).

If your child nods or shakes their head for 'yes/no', that's fine. Add a comment to move the conversation on, eg 'Yes, we came last week, didn't we?' But with other sorts of questions, your child will probably find it easier to answer if you don't look at them. Fiddle with something if it helps!

- 2 If there is no response, make it a private conversation between you and your child:

- ★ gently **repeat** the question *or*
- ★ turn it into a **choice** 'X or Y?' *or*
- ★ **rephrase** it, so that your child only needs to say 'Yes' or 'No' *or* nod or shake their head.

- 3 **Wait** for a full five seconds. Face your child, so they can't whisper in your ear.

If your child answers or gestures, smile and add a comment to move things on. Keep any acknowledgement of this great achievement for a private moment – your child doesn't want attention drawn to their talking in public.

- 4 If there is no response, **move the conversation on** without answering, eg:

- ★ say to your child, 'We'll have a think about that, won't we?' or 'Tell me later'
- ★ ask the other person a question to divert attention from your child
- ★ change the subject
- ★ say your goodbyes.

WAIT ⇒ **REPEAT/REPHRASE** ⇒ **WAIT** ⇒ **MOVE ON**