

SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM

These suggested interventions assume the child is capable of verbalizing and has a history of verbalizing in some settings. The interventions assume the child's failure to verbalize is based on mild social anxiety, as opposed to a history of trauma, and that use of the interventions does not place excessive pressure/stress on the child. The interventions assume that a primary reason the problem persists is because the child receives attention and is enabled by others or because the behavior has become a habit. The interventions should not be used as a means of punishment, though allowing the child to suffer the natural consequences of their behavior by missing out on activities or tangibles is acceptable. The interventions should not take the place of an appropriate diagnostic evaluation and broader-based treatments for other aspects of the disorder or for co-occurring disorders.

1. Audiotape or videotape the child in the company of a person they normally talk to. Activities could be reading to a parent, reciting a nursery rhyme, or singing a song. Allow the child to listen to or view the tape. Have a person the child doesn't talk to listen to or view the tape in the child's presence. This might be a good way to handle certain academic assignments. The child can recite the alphabet or read an assigned book at home with a parent and take the tape to school to play for the teacher to receive credit. The tape might initially be played only for the teacher, then for a small group of students, then for the whole class.
2. Allow the child to have special time with the counselor (playing a board game) if they will verbalize in that setting. If that is successful, allow the child to bring a peer the next time, then two peers. If that is successful, allow the child and those two peers to have free time in the class to play the same game with others nearby.
3. Reinforce successive approximations of the desired behavior. Use a high level of praise when the child does verbalize. Help the child set goals and offer tangible or activity rewards as incentives for meeting those goals.
4. Coaxing and cajoling should be avoided since the attention could be reinforcing or could increase anxiety.
5. As a general rule, do not "rescue" or "enable" by talking for the child or allowing another person to talk for the child. Children with selective mutism often have friends or family members who assume the task of talking for the child or "translating" what the child has whispered, and this should be discontinued. In some instances, a middle step involves allowing the child to whisper to a person they have not talked to before, but they would not be allowed to whisper to a person they normally talk to who is serving as a translator.
6. When appropriate, allow the child to suffer the natural consequences of failing to verbalize. For example, if they do not ask for an object or for permission to participate in an activity, then they would not be allowed access to the object or activity. This applies to non-essential things. It would not be appropriate to withhold a meal or prevent the child from participating in an educational activity. If use of this intervention results in the child missing out to the extent that it becomes punitive, or if it results in further social isolation, it should be discontinued.