FINALLY:
The child with elective mutism can prove to be very challenging but given time and careful planning, the challenges are usually overcome.

In most respects, the child should be treated as a full member of the class following the National Curriculum and all of the other social and educational opportunities in school.

Parents will need support and encouragement during this time, but the school, working closely with the parents and with other outside support services, can make a powerful difference.

Some Useful sources of Information:

www.selectivemutism.co.uk
(SMIRA – Selective Mutism Information & Research Association)

www.selective-mutism.com
(A teacher & parent resource for strategies to use with selectively mute children)

Oxfordshire NHS
Children’s Therapy Services

Benedict East
Speech & Language Therapist
07887 846 611
Benedict.east@nhs.net

Helping the Child with Elective Mutism

GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS
WHAT IS ELECTIVE MUTISM?

The term elective (or selective) mutism describes the behaviour of children who are able to speak but remain silent with certain people or in certain settings. It is most commonly noticed when a child joins a school.

The Key Indicators of Elective Mutism:

- The child can speak and has no significant speech and language difficulties
- There is a persistent lack of speech in some places (school) but not in others (home).
- The child has difficulty in forming relationships
- The behaviour continues for at least two months
- Progress in school is often restricted.

These guidelines are intended to give schools practical information on helping children with elective mutism.

Elective Mutism – The known facts:

Elective mutism is a complicated problem and there are a number of theories as to why it happens. Key points suggest that:

- Children with elective mutism are few and far between;
- There are more girls than boys with elective mutism;
- Teachers and parents can experience high levels of frustration and even anger when it persists;
- Forcing a child to speak doesn’t help;
- Few children simply just “grow out of it”
- If the condition persists a planned approach usually helps;
- Approaches and intervention tend to work best when they occur in places where the child does not speak;
- Intervention requires patience and time;
- The involvement of the parents is critical.

A Whole School Approach:

The child with elective mutism will inevitably find themselves in a number of awkward situations during the school day and will come into contact with lots of adults. Therefore it is important that the school considers the child’s needs right across the school day.

- Make sure all the adults who are involved with the child (teachers, TA, lunch-time staff) are aware of the child’s difficulty.
- Encourage them not to force the child to speak.
- Make sure they give praise and possibly rewards every time they hear the child speaking.
- Try to ensure the child is not isolated in the playground or dining hall.

School Based Intervention:

Decrease the child’s anxiety:

- Do not force the child to speak;
- Keep him in a mainstream class;
- Put more emphasis on activities that do not involve spoken language (e.g. writing, silent reading, drawing, board games).
- Encourage the child to work and play with others.

Help the child to communicate in other ways:

- Give the child other ways to communicate (symbols, gestures, cards)
• Allow the child to use the computer for writing messages;

• Put the child in a small group for tasks in the classroom.

  Make sure the child is always included in team games and assemblies.

  Help the child to socialise with other children:

• Link the child with children who might also be friends outside school;

• Keep the child in the same groups for work in the classroom;

• Make sure that group work ensures that children do work together in the classroom or school;

• Find out from the parents, what the child's favourite activities are and see if these can be replicated in the classroom or school.

Help the child to speak more often:

• Plan a behaviour programme and make sure there are lots of small steps;

• Whenever the child makes sounds (other than whisper) give lots of praise.

• Make sure the praise relates to the sounds or words the child actually used;

• Consider tangible rewards, or a star chart and the parents can give rewards at home;

• Decrease the use of rewards as the child speaks more in class;

Provide regular, short periods, of withdrawal for language work with other children.

Planning an Intervention Programme:

Each child’s programme will need to be tailored to their own circumstances and advice from the school’s Educational Psychologist will usually be needed. Some key points:

• Involve people (parents) with whom the child does speak;

• Targeted activities should be carried out at school;

• Programmes should be run initially in small rooms with people with whom the child will talk;

• Rewards and praise should be an integral part of the programme;

• Involve the child, where possible, in the planning (choosing rewards) this may be done with the parents at home.

• Allocate 15 minutes per day to carry out the programme;

• As sounds and normal voice is made, involve more people, but very gradually;

• Be patient and keep calm.