



Supporting Children who are 'Reluctant Communicators'

Lots of children experience anxiety around interacting with others and communicating verbally in unfamiliar situations. This advice is intended for parents to follow themselves, but also to share with less familiar adults such as extended family members and teachers with whom the child may not communicate verbally.



In general, focus on the things your child can do rather than what they can't. Foster their individual interests, skills and talents so that they know they have plenty of things to feel good about.



Adopt an open approach to talking about emotions and worry. Reassure the child that they are not alone and lots of people experience worry and difficulty talking in school. Acknowledge your child's worries but help them to realise that it's something that can be overcome e.g. *'You might be a bit worried about school because you haven't been before. But I'm sure that once you get there you will realise that nothing bad is going to happen and the worry will quickly go away!'*

In the same way, create an environment where mistakes are expected to happen, check your reaction to your own mistakes and try and stay matter-of-fact and rational about them.



If your child has difficulties with speech and language that might be impacting on their confidence in communicating, reassure them by saying *'talking is tricky when you're still learning.'* Your Speech and Language Therapist can provide additional advice on building confidence in children with Speech and Language delay or disorder.



Ensure that any comments about the child's lack of speech in front of other children are encouraging and stress that the difficulty will not last forever.



Acknowledge the child's difficulty, but in doing so, be careful to reassure and build confidence as opposed to add to their anxiety. For example, see the table below:

You may be tempted to say:	It's better to say:
I know it's really hard for you	I know it's horrid but it won't always be like this
Don't worry if you find it difficult, you don't have to join in if you don't want to	It's very hard for you at the moment so you have to miss out sometimes. But don't worry, we will all help you until you can join in the fun too.
He/she is feeling very shy today and not feeling ready to speak to us in circle time	He/she needs time to get used to being here – that happens to lots of children. He/she is still a very important person in the class.

When unfamiliar adults asks your child direct questions, wait a short time (approximately 5-10 seconds) to give them an opportunity to answer. Try to look relaxed and busy yourself with something e.g. looking in your bag. If your child does not answer, get down to their level

and make the question easier for them e.g. a yes/no question that can be answered with a nod or the shake of a head. For example:

Adult: *'How old are you?'*

Parent waits 10 seconds and busies themselves with something. If the child still does not answer, parent gets down to child's level:



Parent: *'Are you 8?'*

Child answers by shaking their head

Parent: *'Silly me! You're 7 aren't you?'*

Child answers with a nod of the head.

General Do's and Don'ts of Supporting Reluctant Communicators:

<p>Do:</p> 	<p>Don't:</p> 
<p>Adults should talk and read with your child without expecting speech in return. You can provide reassurance by assuring the child that they will find talking easier if they slowly take baby steps to try and join in.</p>	<p>Adults should avoid direct questions unless they require a yes/no answer that can be given by a nod or shake of the head.</p>
<p>Create an atmosphere that is relaxed, fun and friendly. Build a rapport by doing things that he/she enjoys.</p>	<p>Do not use comments about the child's lack of speech that reinforce the difficulty e.g: <i>'She doesn't talk in school; she won't speak to you'</i></p>
<p>Use comments as oppose to questions such as 'I wonder...., I expect..... It looks as though....' These comments invite a response but do not demand one. Avoid too much eye contact after providing the opportunity to speak.</p>	<p>Your child wants to speak, despite their silence, so do not resort to bribery, challenging, threats or gentle persuasion in order to elicit speech.</p> <p>Try to provide natural incentives to speak (seeing other children gain from speaking or positive reinforcement; responding to any communicative intent non-verbal or verbal with warmth and approval).</p>
<p>Accept natural spontaneous gesture, acknowledging that speech is difficult and say 'Can you</p>	<p>Do not speak for your child or encourage the parent to speak for the child. Instead parents should make the</p>

<p>show/find/draw me....' Rather than 'tell me'.</p>	<p>question an easier one to answer with a non-verbal response.</p>
<p>When the child eventually does speak, react to what the child has said not the fact that they have spoken.</p>	<p>Whispering can be accepted but should not be actively encouraged as it reinforces the child's fear of their voice being heard and can also damage their voice.</p>
<p>Where possible, school should create opportunities for the child to sit near and work with children who they might speak to outside of school. Play dates during the holidays can be beneficial. Furthermore, it may help to ease the child into new environments if parents are invited into school to take part in activities e.g. reading.</p>	<p>Try not to treat the child delicately or have different expectations of the child (not related to speech). Too much comfort when the child does not speak can reinforce the difficulty, instead try and stay matter-of-fact and neutral e.g. 'that's okay, maybe you can tell Mum later'.</p>
<p>Actively involve child, make them aware of what is happening during intervention. Never surprise them with something without warning. Build a mutually trusting relationship.</p>	<p>Do not object to the child talking 'through' friends. This should be responded to warmly e.g. if a friend tells you <i>'Mohammed says he wants to take the register today'</i>.</p>
<p>Whole class activities where verbal communication is not required may be beneficial. Teachers should make it clear to all children beforehand that talking is not needed for this activity. Answering the register non-verbally or in unison is a useful approach to adopt e.g. <i>'Is Emily here?'</i> and the whole class answers. This will also help the class get to know each other's names!</p>	<p>Adults should never demand that the child uses social niceties such as greetings, saying please or thank you. If you do ask a question, either answer it yourself or make a comment of 'let's decide later'.</p>
<p>In order to reduce fear around others hearing their voice, recording devices can be used to support the child. For example, ask the child to record their weekend news at home using an iPad or toy with a recorder. This clip can then be played in circle time so that the child doesn't miss out. Ask the child whether they'd be happy with this in the first instance to maintain a trusting relationship.</p>	