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EDUCATION CHALLENGES SELECTIVE MUTISM

When children can't speak

Many teachers and their assistants have met children who don't talk in school, but who speak willingly at home. Michael Jones describes what might lie behind this behaviour and how adults can help children with selective mutism



Building a trusting relationship with an adult in school is important for children at the early stage of becoming a confident speaker.

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Angie is a five year old who went to kindergarten when she was three and a half, and has been at school for three months. During that time she has not spoken to anyone outside her house. At home with her family she is very talkative and active, but in public she is withdrawn and fearful when anyone approaches her, and does not talk to adults or other children.

What at kindergarten seemed to be extreme shyness has now become a chronic condition,

explain her silence, and have had a range of advice. The predominant opinion is that Angie is being manipulative in an effort to draw attention to herself.

However, the reality is that Angie is exhibiting the classic behaviour associated with selective mutism, where children are able to talk freely at home with their family, but are unable to talk in public, and especially at kindergarten or school.

selective mutism mainly affects girls, who often have no other problems with speaking or understanding what is said to them. Some boys may also react in this way, but research shows that over half of the boys may have some other type of communication difficulty, like stammering or problems with expressing themselves clearly.

The condition was previously known as 'elective mutism', which emphasised the belief that the child could speak, but was choosing not to. Psychologists and speech and language therapists in the UK now use the term 'selective' instead of 'elective'. This is not just a change of words, but reflects a completely different way of thinking about the condition, and how to go about helping children like Angie become confident speakers.

We would see Angie as someone who wants to talk in groups, but can't. We know that many children with selective mutism are often very sensitive and worry a lot about adult reactions. They are often unwilling to try new things unless they are sure they will get them absolutely right first time, and may be fearful of new events, such as going to a party.

These reactions far exceed what other children normally experience as healthy apprehension, but who are able to quickly get over their worry, and can enjoy being with a new person or accepting a new challenge like starting school.

We also see selective mutism as a type of social phobia. The child would love to be able to talk to other people, but often feels that there is an actual physical blockage preventing her from speaking. She may go to great lengths to avoid speaking outside her home, and find enormous relief from avoiding having to talk. It is this feeling of relief that acts as a reward, and encourages her to remain silent.

Expert solution

Adults who have a fear of, for example, spiders, dogs, heights, or public speaking, or who have a severe phobia, will understand that even though they recognise their fear is irrational, the experience can still be terrifying.

They will also know that any amount of helpful advice from well-meaning friends will not solve the problem. However, exposure to the feared situation, in small steps, with a sympathetic and experienced adult can help to reduce the fear and build confidence.

This is exactly what is needed to help children with selective mutism. What the adults do is crucial in helping children like Angie along what is often a long road to confident speaking.

The most important first step is actually the easiest, and doesn't involve Angie doing anything. The adults need to understand that she wants to speak, but cannot at the moment. Whenever adults talk about Angie's communication they should use phrases like, "Angie finds it difficult to talk out loud in groups", and actively avoid saying, "She can't speak." This is vital as it encourages everyone, including other children, to think of Angie as someone who, with help, will eventually talk.

Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens are two speech and language therapists in the UK who are recognised as international authorities in the field of selective mutism. In their Handbook on Selective Mutism they describe how crucial it is that all the school staff, including secretaries, mealtime supervisors and anyone who will meet the child, agree on how to communicate with her.

The atmosphere for speaking needs to be right. Ideally adults should avoid asking too many questions, but actively encourage Angie to join in with other children, as well as helping her to participate, rather than doing things for her. She should be given praise for joining in and for trying new things, like taking the register to the office with a friend.

The secretaries can thank both children, and praise them for handing in the register, but avoid asking lots of questions that Angie can't answer.

This may seem like a trivial example, but repeated positive experiences like these go a long way to building confidence, which is the vital foundation for any young child to become a confident speaker. It will help Angie to begin to enjoy making contact with adults, and reduce her avoidance.

It is important that Angie builds up a positive and trusting relationship with her teacher and classroom assistant. They can help by reassuring Angie that they understand that it is difficult for her to talk in school at the moment, and that they can imagine that it must be very hard for her, but it won't always be like that.

Teachers do need to be genuine when they say this, and an honest relationship with a supportive adult is crucial. Children like Angie often find change difficult to cope with, so teachers can help by talking about new events, like going on educational outings. New members of staff or visitors should be briefed about how the adults are working with Angie, without singling her out.

Teachers are sometimes unsure how to respond when other children say things like, "She can't talk." Johnson and Wintgens recommend that the teacher gives a matter-of-fact explanation such as, "Angie doesn't join in by talking at the moment, but we are helping her. It's not something we are going to worry about." Other children should be encouraged to include Angie in activities, but not do things for her.

Other resources

I recommend working closely with parents, where possible, and this can include home

visits. This may seem like a big investment of time, but the benefits are enormous for everyone, because the longer children are silent in public the more entrenched the problem becomes.

It is essential to find professionals who are aware of the latest approaches to selective mutism, and who can assess whether there are any underlying difficulties with speaking that could be causing and adding to the mutism.

The selective mutism Research Association (Smira) have produced a very powerful video about this subject, and I strongly recommend any parent of a child with selective mutism, or a school wanting to help, to invest in it.

It includes the testimonies of young adults who were selectively mute as children, reflecting on their experiences. What they focus on more than anything is the ways that adults helped or hindered their progress.

There are interviews with teachers and support workers, giving practical insights into effective ways to support children who are extremely shy or selectively mute. Smira also provides advice and a network of support for families and children, who often believe that they are the only people with this problem.

Will Angie ever talk in school? The answer is "Yes, but with the right support." She may start to whisper to her friends, or talk to herself under her breath when adults are out of earshot. Adults should avoid making a fuss when this happens, but be pleased that this is a sign that Angie is on the right track to becoming a confident speaker. It may be the start of a very long process, or a precursor to a rapid change in behaviour.

Let's leave the last word to Mark Twain, the American writer, who said about changing human behaviour: "A habit cannot be tossed out of the window. It must be coaxed down the stairs a step at a time." He could have been writing about helping children with selective mutism.

The selective mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens is available from Speechmark Publishing at www.speechmark.net and the selective mutism Information and Research Association (Smira) can be contacted via smira.leicester@ntlworld.com.

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