FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT FOR RELUCTANT SPEAKERS

(edited from Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, 2001 The Selective Mutism Resource Manual – Speechmark).

There are many reasons why some children are reluctant to speak. Further speech and language difficulties can make it even more difficult to understand questions and form a quick accurate response.

Many factors affect whether a reluctant speaker will talk at any particular moment in time. They include:

Familiarity of immediate audience – Children are more likely to talk to a new adult after frequent, regular contact.

Gender – Many children find it easier to talk to women rather than men.

Size of immediate audience – Children are more likely to relax if only a few people are present.

Location – Location can affect where the child feels most relaxed.

Expectation of response – Direct questions provoke far more anxiety than casual remarks and statements. Statements may elicit a response but do not *require* one (e.g. "what did you have for dinner?" vs "I thought the roast chicken was great today." Reluctant speakers rarely respond to bribery, flattery, challenge, threats or gentle persuasion. All these produce an expectation to respond, which increases pressure on the child to speak.

Eye contact – Children often find it easier to respond if the adult is not making direct eye contact. Being watched seems to add to the pressure to speak.

Language purpose – Children can be wary of being "tested out" and their anxiety can increase if this is the case. They may respond well if their ideas are used to direct a popular character on a computer programme, but become silent if an adult attempts to elicit speech with little functional value.

Linguistic complexity / sentence length – Children with language difficulties may worry about whether they have understood, and whether they can produce an acceptable response. They may seem ready to communicate at one moment, then reluctant to the next, depending on the complexity of the language involved. They do best when tasks are kept very simple, and visual props are used to support their understanding and recall.

Decision making – Many reluctant speakers show a dislike, or difficulty in, making choices. They may find it extremely difficult to indicate, even non-verbally, a menu selection, for example. Even casual invitations such as "pick a fruit", "choose a partner" tend to panic them, for there is no obvious answer and they are unsure about the "correct" response.

Risk of error / failure / disapproval – People find it easier to respond or comment if they feel confident their answer is "correct" and acceptable. At a simple level, they may feel anxious about speaking if they expect their attempts to be rejected or criticised in some way. Reluctant speakers are generally thrown by unexpected questions or situations, and seem to do best in planned, structured or familiar conversational routines.

Extent and visibility of physical movements – In severe cases, when the child has become very frozen, hidden body movements (e.g. eye pointing, tapping under the table) will provoke less anxiety than more obtrusive movements (e.g. finger pointing, waving arms).

(some strategies taken from Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, 2001 The Selective Mutism Resource Manual – Speechmark).

o **Avoid direct questions**, unless they require a yes/no answer that can be given by a nod or shake of the head, or the child can point to respond.

o If you do inadvertently ask a direct question, either answer it yourself or quickly side step with comments such as "Let's decide later."

o Make comments such as **"I wonder….", "It looks as though…." "I expect…."** Which may provoke response but do not require one.

o Try to **use statements** rather than questions.

o **Avoid too much eye contact**.

o Give the child **time to respond**. If they do not, move on quickly (e.g. say "have a think about that Emma, I'll come back to you in a moment." **Long silences will only increase anxiety**.

o Be aware that different activities have different communication loads. It is easier to count to 10 than it is to answer a "why" question. Try **decreasing the communication load** of the task (see attached table).

o **Accept** natural spontaneous **gesture**.

o Create an accepting and rewarding atmosphere, helping the child to feel valued regardless of talking.

o Try some small group or whole class **activities in unison**, chanting or reciting information all together.

o Do not make the register an issue – accept a smile, nod or raised hand.

o Wherever possible **adapt activities** so they can be **achieved through non-verbal communication** as a matter of course, rather than a substitute for speech.

o Try and make sure the child is not getting extra attention for silence.

o Where possible, inform the child about the topic being discussed beforehand. **Pre-warn** them about questions, so they can have time to think about a response.

o **Acknowledge occasions when the child is reluctant to speak.** Say something like "it's hard for you to speak at the moment, so you have to miss out sometimes. Don't worry, we'll all help you until you can join in the fun too."

o Sometimes **distraction** can be effective. Give the child a job / errand to do (e.g. give out books). Even pretending to drop something can diffuse the tension / anxiety.

o If it is clear the child is unlikely to speak / gesture etc. **interpret more subtle communication attempts** (e.g. rather than waiting for the child to tell you which picture shows a king, praise them if they are looking at the right picture, "well done Emma, you were looking at the king. That's the right answer.")

o **Try not to use bribery, flattery, challenge, threats or gentle persuasion**. All these produce an expectation to respond, which increases pressure on the child to speak.

o Give the child **praise when they have attempted to communicate** in some way (whether their answer is correct or not), e.g. "good try Emma, I'm really pleased you had a go."

Communication Load	Activity
Low	- Rote speech (e.g. counting) - Answering 'yes' or 'no' (content unambiguous) - Reading (no need to analyse text) - Voluntary speech - Single words
Medium	- Picture naming - Sentence completion ("today is ………") - Factual information within child's knowledge - Rehearsed speech - Reading words or phrases out of context - Single words and phrases within language ability
High	- Reading where comprehension is required - Providing alternatives and reasons, own opinions or ideas - Responding to ambiguous or difficult questions - Social speech (greeting, "please", "thank you") - Speech "on demand" - Unplanned speech - Child-initiated speech - Sentences