**Selective Mutism: Dos and Don’ts**

Your goal is to **scaffold** the child until they are speaking in front of the whole class! You MUST keep pushing them and not just settle for separating them from their peers or allowing them to refuse to respond.

**DO**

* Do have the student come in your room before/after school/ during lunch to help out and increase the chances of them speaking to you in your environment (when other students are gone)
* Do give the student the option to 1) whisper to a friend or 2) write out their answer if they are at the stage of not talking
* Do make sure the student has a job (and is performing it) during cooperative group activities (e.g. being the recorder, time keeper, etc)

**DON’T**

* Don't speak for the child.
* Don’t say to people, "S/He doesn't talk."
* Don’t show emotion or make a big deal if the child should speak. Act as if it were normal and continue with your activity. You can let them know privately later, “It was great you participated in class today by talking. I know you can do that all the time and I expect you to try as hard as you can.”

From the National Association of School Psychologists:

**Self-modeling.** Self-modeling, in combination with several behavioral therapy techniques, has been remarkably successful. This is a cognitive-behavioral approach involving making an edited videotape that depicts the child supposedly verbally responding to the teacher’s requests. However, the child in reality has been taped responding to parental requests for verbal responses. The edited videotape is shown to the child in school on several occasions. Various learning and behavioral strategies can accompany the self-modeling intervention, such as allowing the child to stop the videotape whenever the child sees himself or herself talking. At this point, the child is allowed to select a small gift-wrapped reward. The videotape is then shown to the child's classmates to promote peer expectations for appropriate speech. Other cognitive behavioral approaches involve the teacher and parents using frequent praise to promote the gradual and increasing use of speech. It is generally recommended that any attempts at verbal communication be reinforced (e.g., praise for audible whispers).

**Fading.** Fading involves placing the child in a social setting that requires speech, maybe playing Monopoly after school. The other players are individuals that the child readily speaks to, such as family members. Subsequently, classmates who have volunteered to stay after school and with whom the child does not speak are gradually introduced to the game. Consequently, the discrimination between those individuals to whom the child does or does not speak is faded. The fading technique can be easily applied in other settings as well, such as taking the child to a highly desirable restaurant where the child typically exhibits normal speech. During the meal, other children with whom the child was previously mute are gradually introduced into this comfortable situation.

**Successive approximation.** Normal speech can be promoted by the teacher by rewarding small increments toward achieving conversational speech. For example, the teacher at first rewards the child’s written response only if the child also makes some noise. Following this, rewards are given if the child makes the noise only. This can be subsequently shaped to humming, repeating letters, reading small phrases, and, eventually, to normal speech.

**Mystery motivator**. A very economical intervention is using a mystery motivator, or simply keeping the reward for appropriate verbal speech unknown to the child. This tends to heighten the value of the reward, similar to that of a wrapped birthday present. The teacher simply inserts a picture or description of the reward in an envelope and writes the child’s name prominently and a question mark on the outside of the envelope. The envelope is then clearly displayed on the bulletin board. The classmates are introduced to the mystery motivator and told that it is a gift for the child with selective mutism once the child talks in class.

**Parent involvement**. Parents can assist teachers in implementing classroom-based interventions designed for their child. They can parallel teacher attempts at remediation by ignoring their child’s attempts to nonverbally communicate and by not interpreting the child's needs to others. Conversely, if the child does speak in unexpected settings, or with unexpected individuals, the verbal behavior should be rewarded.