

Secondary school transitions for children with selective mutism

Planning checklist

Remember, time invested in ensuring a positive transition will save time later!

Children with selective mutism will need an enhanced transition, with meetings to coordinate this. At a minimum there should be one meeting before the transition (ideally before Easter) and one meeting after the transition has happened.

The whole team around the child should be invited to transition meetings e.g. parents, current class teacher and ALNCo, new form tutor and ALNCo. The child's views should be sought and taken into account. The transition plan should be flexible and adapted based on the child's needs and progress.

Before the first meeting

- Parents and school staff should gather any helpful documents, including the child's IDP.
- Ensure you have a document outlining how selective mutism currently affects the child, and what is currently working well for them.
- The child's new form tutor and ALNCo should access basic information on selective mutism, for example by watching the *Introduction to selective mutism* video.

Suggested agenda items for meeting(s) before transition

1. Ensure everyone present has a shared understanding of selective mutism as an anxiety disorder, not a choice, and understands that parents and school staff must work together to create an environment in which the child can thrive.
2. Plan how to ensure that all school staff are aware of selective mutism and know how to interact with a child with selective mutism. Could the *Introduction to selective mutism* video be shared via email or watched at an INSET day or staff meeting?
3. Agree key points that all members of school staff need to know about the child. For example,
 - *[Name] has selective mutism, an anxiety disorder that means they are unable to speak in certain situations.*

- How the child is able to communicate in school e.g. *[Name] is able to answer yes/no questions by nodding/shaking their head and is able to write in class as long as they do not feel under scrutiny. [Name] is unlikely to be able to initiate communication, which means that they won't be able to ask for help or volunteer information.*
 - Whether the child should be cold called in class.
 - How the register should be handled e.g. *accept eye contact or a raised hand as [Name's] response.*
 - The name/contact details of the key member of staff for the child in the new setting.
4. Plan how to share the above information. Is there a way of highlighting the child to all staff who may interact with them, including supply staff and office staff? The child is unlikely to be able to advocate for themselves, and they probably won't want to stand out as being different, so this needs to be handled with care.
 5. Discuss adaptations needed for assessment and to ensure that the child will be placed in classes according to their true ability rather than in lower groups due to their inability to speak in class. For example, if the child is able to record themselves at home, could this be used instead of speaking assignments in school? Or could their written work be taken as evidence of their skills without the teacher hearing them speak?
 6. Discuss who the child's form tutor will be. If there is a choice, consider who will be most suited to the child. Does anyone already have experience of selective mutism? Who is calmer and more sensitive? The team will need to know which class the child will be moving into and who their form tutor will be so that the transition plan can be carried out effectively.
 7. Unless the child wants a completely fresh start, aim for them to have at least two peers in their new tutor group that they know and get on well with.
 8. If the school uses seating plans, ensure that whenever possible the child is seated next to a peer they know and get on well with. This will help reduce the child's anxiety and therefore increase their ability to concentrate and learn.
 9. Children with selective mutism often struggle with eating, drinking, and using the toilet in school. Consider what reasonable adjustments may be necessary to support the child to meet their basic physiological needs in school. Could they eat their lunch in a smaller room with a friend? Is there a disabled toilet they could use?
 10. Agree a key member of school staff who will build rapport with the child and check in with them regularly (at least once a week). Consider the best time and method of doing this e.g. in person or via email. Bear in mind that a child with selective mutism may not be able to initiate communication, even via email, so they will be dependent on the member of staff making contact.

11. Agree the details of the transition plan. Decide and record: transition plan aims, when and how to implement the plan, how often visits/sessions should take place, their aims and their structure.

Possible transition plan aims:

- a) For the child to be prepared for the transition
- b) For the child to feel comfortable and confident at their new school
- c) For the child to access the curriculum and participate throughout the school day
- d) For the child to speak to a parent, sibling, or friend in the school setting with nobody else nearby
- e) For the child to speak to a parent, sibling, or friend with school staff able to overhear
- f) For the child to speak to specific member(s) of school staff

Suggested agenda items for meeting(s) following transition

1. What is going well?
2. What is not going well?
3. What are the student's views? (These should be sought in advance).
4. Will the student need reasonable adjustments for exams (particularly oral exams)? If it is too soon to be considering this, set a date to revisit the topic, such as the first term of year 10.
5. Next steps

Sample transition plan

Aim 1: for the child to be prepared for the transition

Task 1: A member of staff from the child's new school (ideally the member of staff who will be the child's key contact in school) to visit child at current school with the aim of reducing the child's fears about the new school and building rapport.

- Play games with the child and a small group of peers. Remember, the aim is to build rapport, not to get the child to talk. The member of staff should make chatty comments and avoid asking direct questions.
- Go through the daily routine, share a map of the school, and any other information the child needs. Sharing a printed document can be helpful as it naturally reduces eye contact.

Task 2: A member of staff from the child's new school (ideally the member of staff who will be the child's key contact in school) to let the child know their selective mutism is understood.

- Reassure the child that school staff understand talking is tricky for them, and they know not to put the child under pressure to talk.
- If appropriate, have another adult present that the child is already comfortable with, who can act as intermediary during this conversation if needed.

Aim 2: for the child to feel comfortable and confident at their new school.

Task 1: In addition to any standard open evenings and visits, the child with selective mutism will benefit from visiting their new school with a parent at the end of the day when the other students have gone home. Example activities:

- Using a map, practise finding different rooms and places in the school.
- Make a virtual or physical transition book. The child takes photos of the classroom, the toilets, the playground, canteen and any other relevant places around the school. It can also contain pictures of the child's form tutor, subject teachers, the ALNCo, and any support staff. If appropriate, encourage the child to show their transition book to relatives.
- Task 2: If appropriate, and with the child's agreement, for the new class to be educated about selective mutism. The child may want the teacher to talk to the class, or alternatively they may wish to make a video for peers to watch or write a letter for the teacher to read. Discuss with the child whether they want to be present when their peers are learning about selective mutism.

Aim 3: For the child to access the curriculum and participate throughout the school day

Task 1: All staff at the new school, including canteen and office staff, to watch the *Introduction to selective mutism* video, so that they are aware of selective mutism and how to interact with children with selective mutism

Task 2: All staff to be aware of the child with selective mutism, and aware of the agreed key points about how to support the child (see *Suggested agenda items for meeting(s) before transition* agenda item 3).

Task 3: Key members of staff such as the child's form tutor and any members of staff who will be working closely with the child to learn more about selective mutism, for example by watching the *Top Tips for teaching staff* video, *Key techniques* video and, if appropriate, the video on small-steps programmes. School staff could also read the book *Can I tell you about selective mutism* by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens.

Task 4: Consider what reasonable adjustments may be necessary to support the child to meet their basic physiological needs (eating, drinking, and using the toilet) in school (see *Suggested agenda items for meeting(s) before transition* agenda item 9).

Aim 4: For the child to speak to a parent, sibling, or friend in the school setting with nobody else nearby

Aim 5: For the child to speak to a parent, sibling, or friend with school staff able to overhear

Aim 6: For the child to speak to specific member(s) of school staff

Aims 4-6 won't be appropriate for every child with selective mutism. They may be appropriate for a child with less severe selective mutism; or a child who has started speaking to their parent and/or members of staff in their current setting and is motivated to speak in their new setting.

Appropriate tasks to achieve these aims could include settling in sessions, as described in the *Primary school transitions* video, and/or a small steps approach, as outlined in the *Small-steps programmes* video.

For further information and guidance, parents/carers and school staff may wish to refer to *The Selective Mutism Workbook* by Maggie Johnson and Junhua Reitman and *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual, Second Edition*. Maggie Johnson & Alison Wintgens.