



CHILDREN WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM: USING COMPUTER SOFTWARE TO DEVELOP AND SUPPORT CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING AT SCHOOL



Talk4Meaning, an educational consultancy, and AACT for Children are working together to set up a UK-wide research study to investigate an approach to supporting children with *selective mutism* in schools.

What are the aims of the research?

To see whether using two pieces of computer software (*Lexion* and *Choose and Tell*) at home, and then transferring it to school, will help children with selective mutism develop in the early stages of becoming confident speakers at school.

What is Selective Mutism?

Children with selective mutism speak freely with only a small number of people with whom they feel comfortable. Typically children are able to speak at home, with family members, but experience extreme anxiety about speaking outside the home. This anxiety is so strong that the children describe experiencing an actual physical blockage in their throats, (though none actually exists). Unlike most communication difficulties, selective mutism is more common in girls than boys. Boys with selective mutism often have additional communication difficulties, such as a speech impediment or stammer.

Selective mutism may begin as extreme shyness in pre-school years, and develop into extreme selective mutism by the time the child starts school. The condition was originally known as '*elective*' mutism, as it was thought that the children were *choosing* to be silent in public. It is now generally accepted that the children do want to speak, but their anxiety, or phobia, prevents them from speaking in certain selected situations, and most typically at school.

Various approaches are used to help children with selective mutism, but it is generally recognised that the longer the condition persists, and particularly if it continues into secondary school, the more difficult it is for children to develop as confident speakers.

Founder:

Ken Carter

Trustee / Directors:

Professor James Crabbe (Chair)

Michael McAleenan (Company Secretary/Treasurer)

Adrian Ellison

Dr James Ohene-Djan

Vice-President:

Lord Low of Dalston, CBE

Advisers:

Helen Lansdown (Chief Executive, Deafax)

Professor Harold Silver (Educational Research)

Michael Jones (Speech and Language)

Dr Rachel Shipsey (ICT Development)

Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, two UK Speech and Language Therapists, have developed a very successful technique that is widely used throughout the UK, and based on the concept of gradually developing a sense of *confident speaking* in a range of situations, but especially at school. A key aspect is to develop strong links between school and home, so that successful speaking at home can be gradually developed into confident speaking at school.

Lexion software

The Lexion program was originally developed in Sweden to support children and teenagers with difficulties with reading and spelling. An additional benefit has been that it can help to develop children's confidence as speakers. The English version is now widely used in schools throughout the UK. The program 'speaks' to the user, who is encouraged to repeat back words and phrases, during the process of being involved in fun exercises. Some practitioners have found that using Lexion in school has helped children who are anxious about speaking to become more confident as speakers, as well as improving their reading and spelling.

Choose and Tell software

Choose and Tell was originally devised in the UK to help children with moderate and severe learning disabilities, by encouraging them to make choices to develop stories, and thus promote language development. The program is widely used in special education throughout the UK, but is becoming increasingly popular in mainstream schools and pre-school settings; for example with children learning English as an additional language.

Research Method

Michael Jones will build a relationship of confidence with the family. He will use Lexion software to assess children's reading and spelling, and download the software onto the family's computer. Children will be encouraged to play Lexion reading and spelling games on the home computer. Choose and Tell will also be introduced, and particularly with younger children. Michael will gradually introduce Lexion and Choose and Tell into the child's school/classroom, providing the school with the software and training to help adults use it. Children will use the software in school, initially with a familiar adult on their own, and then with other children. Michael will work closely with the family and school to evaluate the software's effectiveness. Wherever possible, local Speech and Language Therapists and other professionals involved with the child will be involved.

Other details

Both Lexion AB, who produce Lexion, and Inclusive Technology, who produce Choose and Tell, have agreed to provide the software free of charge to the families and schools taking part. Families will need a home PC, and to be willing to give time for the initial assessment, and to set up and become familiar with the program (approx one morning or afternoon). Schools will need to be willing to meet with the researchers and commit a named adult to supporting the child with the software in class.

A basic knowledge of Windows XP or Vista is all that is required.

Outcomes from the Pilot Study

Initial outcomes from the pilot stage of the study are very positive. Children and families immediately engage with the software at home. Michael has delivered training on selective mutism in the children's schools, and this has helped to raise awareness of positive approaches that can be used.

Software that has been introduced in school has immediately been used in class, with children with SM responding positively when using the software with friends on the class computer, including using speech (see photograph)

Contacts and Website Information

For more information about Lexion, visit www.euroguide.se

For more information about Choose and Tell, visit www.inclusive.co.uk

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens is published by Speechmark. Details from www.speechmark.net

For more information about selective mutism, contact the Selective Mutism Information and Research Association at www.selectivemutism.co.uk

Michael Jones, who will be directing the research project, is an educational consultant, trainer, researcher and writer, with a background in Speech and Language Therapy and teaching in mainstream and special schools. Michael has a particular interest in supporting children with selective mutism or who are anxious about speaking. For more information about the research, contact Michael Jones via jonmic57@yahoo.co.uk or on 07743 665100/01491 628720

Ken Carter, who is the founder of AACT for Children (www.aact4children.org) and Deafax (www.deafax.org), will be monitoring and evaluating this project. Ken has been active in promoting equality of opportunity over the past 40 years and has been responsible for setting up four educational trusts concerned with ICT, literacy, communication, deafness and disability. He was originally a teacher of the deaf and a parent of a deaf daughter. He is active in the field of research and as such responsible for running the Deafax ICT, Research and Development Unit in Reading. He has secured substantial grants for his work and has, as a result, created considerable job opportunities for deaf, disabled and hearing people. He can be contacted via ken.carter@aact4children.org or ken@deafax.org.

Dr Rachel Shipsey will be a valuable member of the Advisory Group. Her youngest son was diagnosed with a severe and complex speech and language disorder and learning difficulties, so she has become involved in the world of special needs education and has started to do research in the field of assistive technology. She can be contacted via rshipsey@googlemail.com.

