



Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center

BUDDIES, BUDDIES and MORE BUDDIES!!

Building Social Comfort within the Classroom Setting

Ideal for children who are NOT comfortable with the majority of classmates.

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Social comfort proceeds communication.

Social comfort with classroom peers is necessary to enable for progression of communication. Therefore, progression of communication will NOT occur in any large group or even in moderately large group settings without FIRST solidifying comfort ONE on ONE and in very small groups (2-4 children).

Since many children with SM may stand motionless, avoid interaction or parallel play having little ability to 'initiate play' or even respond to another child's overtures, help in this area is often necessary. Help should be in the form of school-based interventions where staff help to facilitate small groups both in and out of the classroom setting (friendship-based groups).

To stimulate communication, we need the child to 'engage' and begin interacting with another child. With interacting, comes social comfort.

Classroom BUDDIES are an excellent way to stimulate social comfort since emphasis is on FEW children at a time.

Each week pick 2-4 buddies for the child. The child should be INVOLVED in the 'buddy choosing' process as much as possible. Obviously, there should be consideration to the age of the child making the choices. Young preschoolers may not have the capability of making a logical choice in a buddy and therefore teachers and parents choose the buddies.

For older preschoolers and elementary children, if classroom teachers have preferences, they can make suggestions to the child, but allowing the child to be involved in 'buddy choosing' process helps the child feel more in control.

Remember, AWARENESS and CHOICE= CONTROL.

BUDDIES are also the children parents should be focusing on for outside PLAY DATES and school staff should be focusing on during FRIENDSHIP-based groups.

The chosen buddies should be 1-2 children who the child feels the MOST comfortable and then 1-2 newer buddies.

Ideally, the child has had play dates with at least a few of the children in class. IF this is the case, social comfort has already begun and perhaps established within the home environment. Since the school is a different setting from home (with more people, feelings of more expectation, etc) the child may not communicate in the same manner with this child within school. OFTEN, the child will feel less comfortable and he/she will BRIDGE down the Social Communication BRIDGE within the classroom setting. Meaning, the verbal child may be nonverbal to his/her friend within school OR perhaps for some, avoid this peer altogether!

However, consistent 'buddying up' with that same buddy is critical to maintain comfort and fuel the communication progress.

Since SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT proceeds communication, once a child is interacting with another child, the communication process has begun! This is positive!

Within school, the child should be grouped and/or paired with these SAME buddies for every possible activity within the classroom and out of the classroom (in music, art, gym, recess).

At the same time, parents should be working on play dates with these children. Play dates are defined as any time where the child can spend ONE ON ONE time with a buddy away from the filled classroom for enough time to build social comfort.

Play dates can therefore be a time at home with a buddy, at a buddy's house, on the school playground after school or on weekends, in the classroom after or before school when no one else is present other than child, buddy and another adult (whom the child is comfortable with!).

Social engagement and comfort will occur the easiest in settings where few are present and the adult present is someone whom the child can verbally communicate with (usually at the child's home!).

Being with a buddy during a play date or time when it is one on one with few others present, is often enough to promote social engagement for MOST children with Selective Mutism (unless a child has other reasons for social interaction difficulties, such as a pervasive developmental disorder or other social skill deficits). For most, given time, social interaction will occur with a buddy. This is usually in the form of nonverbal communication such as increasing eye contact (although fleeting at times), more relaxed and inviting body language such as smiling and perhaps laughing.

How can a parent or teacher help the child progress communicatively with a buddy?

First and foremost by stimulating Nonverbal interaction such as 'handing over' and 'taking over'

Common ways to accomplish this:

Via contrived small groups such as staff facilitated small groups during class with only buddies present AND Friendship-based groups such as recess, snack or lunch bunch.

For children who are not able to nonverbally communicate in a comfortable manner.

(1) Board games or other tasks that involve handing game pieces or items to the other person. Encouraging each child to pick a card for each other then hand it to one another!

(2) Working on a joint project such as an art project, baking, etc where the children can hand each other things!

(3) Interview games, (see directions to interview game) where children ask questions to each other in small groups and the child who is nonverbal can begin to point, write a question or response.

(4) Communication TRICK or TREAT. Where the children pass out stickers, cards or other small items. The teacher can keep track of how many items the child has TAKEN from another child or given to another child!

For the children who ARE nonverbally comfortable, stimulation of transitional skills (to verbal) is needed since LOWERED anxiety is often NOT enough to stimulate verbal communication.

* An outside treatment professional needs to guide this process since there are various strategies/interventions that can be used to help the child transition into verbal communication. Using the verbal intermediary, SOUND approaches and using Augmentive devices are typical examples. However, the specific strategies to use while using the verbal intermediary, SOUND approach or Augmentive device needs to be personalized for each child.

Once social comfort is established and the child is able to nonverbally communicate with the 3-4 buddies, suggestions are to CHANGE buddies where 1-2 buddies stay the same and 2-3 NEW buddies are added. The same activities are worked on again!