

## An advice sheet for people working with older school-aged children and young people

# ENABLING QUIETER STUDENTS TO COMMUNICATE

Communication and interaction are challenging for many students. Some 'freeze' and are *unable* to speak at times, despite conversing confidently and fluently when they are relaxed with friends or close family.

You can help to bridge this gap by (a) having a private word with students to show that you understand and (b) avoiding situations which put unnecessary pressure on them to communicate in front of their peers. Ironically, the less insistence there is on talking, the easier it is for these students to relax, speak and gradually work towards agreed targets, such as taking a turn to read aloud in class. By adopting the following guidelines you can bring out the best in anxious students.

- 1 Some students find it painfully difficult to *initiate conversation*. This includes asking for help or clarification, seeking permission, using social greetings and making friends. They usually do nothing in this situation, or simply loiter, hoping someone notices that they need help or want to be included. If they are getting desperate, some will resort to unusual behaviour to gain attention.

### Try to:

- a) Remember that when anxious students need help, they have difficulty making the first move. They dread drawing attention to themselves in case this leads to a joke or a question or a negative comment which they can't take in their stride. Ask quietly during the lesson or session if there is anything they are not clear about and ensure afterwards that assignments, etc are understood.
- b) Acknowledge written requests and follow them up by talking things through quietly in ways which do not draw unnecessary attention to the student.
- c) Ensure that students can leave to use the toilet, or for any emergency, without seeking permission. Consider a whole-class system, such as signing out, that does not discriminate against individuals who have difficulty making requests.
- d) Make a seat available to the student, rather than expecting them to find their own place.
- e) Always smile at the student, make them feel welcome and say 'Hello' even when there is no reply. Ensure that no one takes it personally if the student maintains a blank or fixed expression and does not actively engage. These are signs of anxiety rather than aloofness and, with the right support, the situation will improve.



- 2 Some students freeze when asked a *direct question*, particularly within earshot of other people.

**Try to:**

- Agree with the student that you will give advance warning of any questions or that they will signal if they are comfortable to be chosen.
- Avoid asking direct questions and allow the student to make their contribution later on, either in writing or on a one-to-one basis.
- Avoid asking the student questions across the room, so that they have to answer to everyone. Stand next to them, so that you can turn to them and address them more privately in a quieter voice.
- Move on calmly to someone else if the student cannot answer, without letting the student feel that they have failed; for example, 'You carry on thinking about that. Anyone else want to have a go?' Feeling that other people are watching and waiting for an answer makes it worse for quieter and anxious students.

- 3 Many students don't like to run the risk of *getting things wrong* or *meeting disapproval*. So any question where there is no definite or simple answer is likely to cause distress and lead to a silent struggle.

**Try to:**

- Tell the student that it is OK to say 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure'.
- Give a choice, eg 'Is it nearer London or Liverpool?'
- Stick to closed questions which have simple factual answers and can be answered in a few words. Leave open-ended questions, opinions, alternatives and explanations until the student is more confident.
- Offer possible alternatives if the student does not answer; for example, "'Well, do you think it was a good idea, not so good, or somewhere in-between?'"

- 4 If you make an *assumption* or a *genuine mistake*, the student will find it extremely difficult to correct you. If they say nothing, you cannot assume that they agree with you. If it's a public situation, lightly move the conversation on, and check later when one-to-one.

**Try to:**

- If you offered a choice, repeat it and add "Or something else?"
- Check your facts or say "I'm not sure if I've got this right". Ask 'yes/no' questions to clarify a situation, rather than leave the student struggling in silence. Alternatively, give them a few moments to gather their thoughts and write down their comments.
- Double-check that the student feels ready for a task or an assignment; for example, "This is what I think you're ready to do. But is there something easier you'd like to do first to prepare for it?" For instance, they might like to run through a presentation with a supportive adult before delivering it to the whole class. Write down the assignment and ask them to either tick it or write an alternative by the end of the day.