

Advice to Parents and Carers during COVID 19

You will, like us, have been bombarded with a lot of information from many sources during the Covid 19 crisis as charities, schools, and national bodies seek to advise and reassure you and your children and young people during this strange and unprecedented time. Sometimes it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information coming at us. We hope that nevertheless you will find this leaflet useful.

Here at SMiRA we are very aware that our children may be some of the most affected by the closure of schools. We know that many of our children may be feeling very comfortable hunkered down at home, and we worry about how our youngsters will manage once they are required to start attending school again. We don't yet know how the system will look at first but it does seem likely that it will be quite a long time before things go completely back to normal. It seems likely that our children will face a period of uncertainty, of potentially a smaller group of students in a class or a part time schooling experience, and possibly more changes of staff. We know that for those of you whose young people have EHCPs the government has temporarily suspended the duty of local authorities to ensure that everything in the EHCP is delivered and instead they must 'do their best'. All of this uncertainty is unsettling for all children of course, but for children with anxiety the impact can be greater still.

We at SMiRA – many of whom have family members who have SM ourselves – know that it is very hard to juggle all that is expected of us in terms of our own work, home schooling and so on. *We can only do what we can do.* So we want to say - if you can only focus on one thing with your SM youngsters during this lockdown period it would be to **prevent them from withdrawing completely to the small comfort zone of home.** This doesn't mean you won't experience some regression and some distress. Anxious children are sensitive to change and in many cases it's frustrating to all of us, including our children, to lose any progress they may have painstakingly made in small steps over time at school. We understand, but feel that rather than focusing on what we have lost and what we cannot do, we can try to focus on what we have and what we can do. We need to try to keep our youngsters 'ticking over' in terms of small amounts of graded exposure. We have therefore put together some suggestions and links to help you with this. As always there are overarching principles, the most important of which when working with anxiety-based conditions is to remember to **enable participation rather than avoidance, even if it is an adapted participation, if it is partial, or if it is just for a short time.** Anxiety will only fade if it is challenged; if the person begins to realise that their fear was out of proportion to the perceived threat.

1. It may not be possible to work on speaking goals in the same way as you have been doing with your child's school, but there may be other ways you can continue to support your child to feel less worried about speaking. Maggie Johnson, author of the Selective Mutism Resource Manual (second edition) has kindly provided ideas and flowcharts on how you

can work on speaking goals – see her Video Chat Small Steps document in the General Information section of our website (address below).

Your child's teacher may be offering video conferences with the whole class or email contact, or even phone calls. Try to enable a degree of participation. During a monitoring call, with your child's agreement, put your child's teacher on speakerphone so he or she can say a few words to your child, with no expectation for your child to answer. Have them join a class video chat at least for a short while. There is no need to turn on the video if they don't want you to, and many teachers are asking all students to be 'muted' unless invited to respond, so your child will be able to speak in the room whilst on mute with no fear of being overheard but in the 'presence' of the teacher. Encourage your child to contribute a written comment on the class blog or, where this is supervised and agreed, a short email exchange via a monitored email account. If some of the children have set up a group to chat see if your child can be included even if they are unable to contribute.

2. SM is almost always more than just speaking. Even if working on talking goals is taking a back seat your child may have other anxiety-based behaviours that you may be able to work on, for example, they may be more hesitant than their peers to develop skills of self-reliance and independence, or of coping with separation. You may be able to identify a skill they could begin to work on safely during this time e.g. if your child can't fall asleep alone, and they are of an age where this is unusual amongst their peers, you might choose to work on this skill. If your teen doesn't know how to use the washing machine or the hob, you could teach them to wash their own clothes or cook simple meals. If your young person has become confined to their room or the house, you could work on getting them outside each day, even if just into the garden to begin with.

You may find the tools from the government's *preparation for adulthood* agenda useful to see what young people of different ages should be able to achieve independently:

<https://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/SiteAssets/Downloads/yeded5wb636481748062535810.pdf>

We always advise 'start where the child is' and work on a graded ladder of challenges where the child can experience success from the start. Just like with sliding in, if the child fails to achieve a step it would be really important that you as the adult take responsibility for that, by apologising that you went too fast and telling them that it doesn't matter, you can take a step back and try again next time. An example small steps programme is below. The Comfort, Stretch, Panic Zone method (also below) can be useful in formulating goals and grading and ordering steps.

For younger children family bravery charts where everyone nominates a skill to improve, or bravery beads where they add a bead to a necklace for each step towards the brave action, can be reinforcing. Remember though that it is a fine line between rewarding and pressuring and different children have different tolerance or sensitivity to perceived pressure. You know your children best. You aren't aiming to achieve change without any stress at all – this may not be possible – but (just like sliding in) you undertake to change one thing at a time, not going too fast, and taking a step back if it all feels too much for your child, whilst encouraging their sense that they *can* do it, and avoiding jumping in to prevent them feeling any stress at all. Successfully managing mild stress builds resilience.

The aim is **to help your child have improved self-efficacy – their belief that they are competent and can manage**. This is something that many anxious children don't believe. They feel that they cannot do things, that they need help.

There is a lot of good advice about how to foster resilience and a sense of competence online. Here is one summary:

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/emotional-intelligence/competence>

3. Finally, be kind to yourselves. These are unprecedented times and sadly some of us are stuck in with 'shielding' family members. Many of us are managing without seeing much loved brothers, sisters, cousins, grandparents etc. We may have lost loved ones before their time.

If you get nothing achieved except surviving lockdown don't worry too much. Most schools understand that they will need to gently re-transition some of their students and they are expecting that many children, especially the younger and more vulnerable students, will have some regression. Keep in touch with your child's teacher, key worker, SENCO or head of year. Be proactive in arranging to discuss their transition back to school once we have a clearer timetable.

Keep safe.

The SMiRA committee
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Example small steps programme: Getting outside

- Day 1: Sit on a chair with Mum beside the open back door for 10 mins with a cup of tea.
Day 2: Sit on a chair with Mum outside the open back door for 10 mins with a cup of tea.
Day 3: Sit on a chair with Mum outside the back door with a cup of tea for 5 mins, then walk around the garden with Mum for 5 mins.
Day 4: 10 mins walking around the garden with Mum.
Day 5: 10 mins walking around the garden: after 5 mins, Mum will pop inside and come back out.
Day 6: 10 mins in back garden: Mum will pop inside for last 5 mins.
Day 7: 10 mins in the garden while Mum stays inside.

Or

- Day 5: Go from back garden through side gate with Mum and stand in the street outside the front of the house together.
Day 6: Go to the front door outside together for 5 mins, stand out the front.
Day 7: Go to the front door, walk up and down the street together for 10 mins.

The steps needed will depend on the goal – the first example here is more focused on going outside alone, whereas the second is aiming to get the child on a walk. You may be able to go faster than this of course. It's just an example!

The Comfort, Stretch, Panic Zone method - [Speech-freedom.co.uk](https://speech-freedom.co.uk) 2020

Getting people to rate the scariness of doing something on a 1-10 scale really gets them to think about HOW scary something is, rather than everything is super scary and can't be done.

The Comfort, Stretch, Panic zone idea can then be applied.

Many children say 1-5 is comfort zone, 6-8 is stretch zone and 9-10 is panic zone.

- Things in the comfort zone we can stretch.
 - Things in the stretch zone we repeat until in the comfort zone and then stretch again.
 - Things in the panic zone we ignore for the moment, but can return to and regrade at a later stage when confidence has increased and they may be less scary.
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Panic zone



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SMiRA is a support group for those affected by SM, parents and professionals, which was founded by Alice Sluckin, O.B.E., and which is based in Leicester, U.K.

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