

Selective Mutism Group

Issue #7

“At home Lily is chatty, sings and dances with glee. She's full of life and lets her voice be heard; when she's upset with her brother, she isn't afraid to yell. But the minute we step outside our home Lily becomes shy, introverted, freezes with fear and will not talk to anyone - not relatives, friends, neighbours nor teachers.”

This description is one we often hear from parents who are seeking help for a child with Selective Mutism, an anxiety-based mental health condition characterized by a child's fear of speaking in certain social situations. The anxiety these children feel robs them of the ability to approach classmates and make new friends, add their thoughts to a classroom discussion, or ask for help from a teacher if they were ever feeling unsafe. Lily was one such girl, and her parents came to us with their concerns.

The George Hull Centre has seen a steep increase in the number of children struggling with Selective Mutism. To address this need, we developed the *Hear My Voice* pilot group to provide children (4-7 years) a therapeutic, safe environment where they practice social pragmatics (e.g.: turn taking, interaction with peers, eye contact), haptics (experiencing touch through communication), choice making and ultimately *finding their voice*.

Hear My Voice replicates the structure and program of a school classroom, including Show and Tell, story time and All About Me. This replication increases both the child's level of comfort and their chances of generalizing into their school and other areas of their lives.

To achieve the ultimate goal of speaking freely, we use a step-task ladder made up of non-verbal and verbal tasks that become increasingly more challenging. The communication level builds with mouthing sounds, vocalizing single words in a whisper and answering simple questions with a yes/no response. All efforts are rewarded with tokens that are redeemed at the *Hear My Voice* Store where they ask non-verbally or verbally for an item. Lily's favourite moment in group was at the end, when she proudly handed in her tokens at the Hear My Voice Store and picked out some Silly Putty. This reward system and modified behaviour approach helps maintain their motivation.

Working with children with Selective Mutism takes time, patience and empathy on the part of staff and parents, and improvements come in varying degrees. Observed results of this pilot have been very encouraging. Every child showed significant improvements after a few weeks, whether that be comfort with non-verbal skills such as tolerating sitting next to each other or increased eye contact, to being able to talk to friends in class. By week 11, two children were able to use their voices regularly in and out of group! Lily, who had not spoken in class at all last year, began talking to her school friends and teacher after just a few weeks. Thanks to the Centre's *Hear My Voice* program, Lily is on her way to developing normal relationships with peers, participating in school and social situations, advancing her education and letting everyone hear her voice.

