

Working with

children

who lack confidence speaking publicly (revised)



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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Working with children who lack confidence speaking publicly

It is common for most adults and children to feel nervous about speaking in public at some time in their lives. Some children fear speaking publicly in all situations, including reading aloud or answering questions in class, while others fear only formal class presentations or performing in front of the school.

Teachers expect children to speak to small groups or the whole class for a range of reasons. Public speaking can include activities such as a sports report, a book review, a debate, feedback on a group activity or introducing an item at a concert. Children who lack confidence about speaking in public are often fearful that others will judge them negatively. Their thoughts surrounding the public speaking event are usually not rational, and tend to focus on and exaggerate the possible negative outcomes they think may occur. Examples of typical thoughts include, 'Everyone will think I'm stupid', 'I'll forget what I'm going to say', 'No one will like my talk and then no one will want to hang out with me' or 'I'll go red' and everyone will think I'm a loser.'

Young children may not be able to identify what they are afraid of, or even the feelings associated with speaking publicly.

Behaviours

Young children may demonstrate their anxiety about speaking publicly through one or more of the following behaviours:

- speaking softly
- avoiding answering questions in class
- asking to go last in presenting to the class
- withdrawing
- becoming angry
- becoming frustrated
- crying
- having a tantrum
- acting out in class prior to or following speaking in class
- using avoidance by continuing to be busy elsewhere, such as helping another teacher, by leaving prompt notes at home or by being absent
- developing psychosomatic symptoms, e.g. nausea, headache, frequent need to go to the toilet or wanting to go to the sick bay



Older children may demonstrate similar behaviours. Additional behaviours and signs of distress may include:

- feeling panic or freezing
- blushing or worrying that they will 'go red'
- stumbling over their words
- reading or presenting their talk in a monotone
- excessive perspiration
- reading from or constantly looking down at their notes throughout a presentation
- speaking too quickly.

As children move into late primary school and early adolescence they become more self-conscious about being seen by their peers to be lacking in confidence and anxious about public speaking. They can be ashamed and embarrassed by their lack of confidence. Also, as children become more self-conscious about the way they look – their hair, skin, weight, fashion sense, they can feel even less able to stand in front of a group to speak. These further stressors can add to the ordeal of public speaking and may lead to increased absenteeism. Absenteeism is more prevalent in this age group for students who are anxious about performance and speaking in front of groups.

Teacher attitudes, expectations and patience

All children can experience performance anxiety about speaking in public and therefore teachers need to have reasonable expectations about what is developmentally appropriate. Teachers need to be mindful that children's temperaments vary, and teacher attitude can play an important part in supporting children to build confidence or in making them feel uncomfortable or anxious.

Extreme anxiety about public speaking is a very painful experience for some children and it is important that teachers don't inadvertently behave in a way that contributes to the problem or makes it worse. An impatient teacher attitude, talking publicly about a child's lack of confidence, shaming, ridiculing or joking about it, or even dismissing it can embarrass a sensitive child. An effective teacher approach based on the following model¹ may assist a number of children. These include:

- Empathy – let the child know that you understand public speaking can be difficult.
- Curiosity – invite the child to talk about why it is hard to speak in front of a group.
- Reassurance - be positive about the child's ability.
- Encouragement – set the child up for success with a practical strategy that helps deal with their worry or concern.
- Expectations – start with reasonable and achievable experiences to help develop confidence in public speaking over time.
- Patience - support the child to build confidence while explaining that it is natural for everyone to feel some discomfort from time to time.

¹ Sommers-Flanagan, R. & Sommers-Flanagan, J. (2004) *Problem Child or Quirky Kid*. Ibis Publishing: Australia.



Strategies to support the child who lacks confidence in speaking publicly

General classroom strategies

- **Empathise with the child and acknowledge their fears.** Talk with the whole class about the fears most people face when speaking publicly, such as fear of being ridiculed or laughed at, not being good enough, not remembering what to say, or people thinking what you say is incorrect or silly.
- **Ask the child about their self-talk.** If they say they are nervous and can't do it, help them to use positive self-talk, for example, 'I have practised this and I am okay', 'It might be hard at first but I can do it', 'I am no better and no worse at speaking to the class than anyone else'.
- **Praise the child when they engage in class discussion.** Use specific, labelled praise to identify aspects of the answer or presentation you liked, even if the content was not all correct. For example, 'I liked the way you joined in our discussion', or 'Thank you, Jordan, I liked the way you used personal examples to illustrate your point.'
- **Build on their conversational skills:**
 - **Remind the class to use social graces.** Talk with the class about the importance of saying 'please', 'hello', 'thank you' and 'goodbye' at appropriate times so these verbal behaviours become automatic and don't require teacher prompting.
 - **Teach the child how to engage in conversations.** The give and take of conversation, or 'conversational ping pong' can be taught from an early age. Young children can practise skills such as turn taking, introductions, interrupting and finishing a conversation using finger puppets and hand puppets. For older children teachers can also model how to initiate conversations, how to respond to others when they are first introduced, how to continue a conversation, and how to 'chip in' to a three-way conversation.
 - **Teach how to use 'open' and 'closed' questions.** Show how open questions tend to promote verbal communication and provide a greater opportunity for others to offer an opinion, while closed questions tend to elicit a one-or two-word response such as 'yes' or 'no'. An example of a closed question is, 'Do you like ice cream?' An example of an open-ended question is, 'Can you tell me about your favourite dessert?'
- **Create an insult-free-zone.** Make it clear that it is rude and unacceptable to talk, laugh at or make fun of someone who is presenting to the class. Set appropriate consequences for rudeness, such as apologising to the person in writing or completing a written 'reflection sheet' where the unacceptable behaviour is reflected on in relation to a school rule or school value.
- **Establish a community of respect.** This is a step beyond creating an insult-free zone—it's a classroom environment where all class members foster and support one another's learning and respect others' rights to speak and disagree with what is said. Over time, the classroom becomes a safe place for speaking and listening.



Encourage public speaking

- **Use a staged approach to confidence building for the young child.** Offer the child small doses of exposure to speaking publicly, for example, begin with the group reciting a poem or reading aloud, and then the child recites a short line by themselves. Over time build on the amount of material to be spoken to the group.
- **Create opportunities for the child who is not confident speaking to a group to go first.** This can eliminate some of the anxiety that builds up when children are waiting for their turn to speak. Similarly, if the child who is lacking in confidence puts their hand up to answer a question, invite them to answer immediately so their courage is quickly reinforced.
- **Use informal speaking opportunities in the classroom for practice such as:**
 - **asking the child to give simple messages** to another student, a teacher or to school office staff.
 - **sharing their progress**, where all children are encouraged to jot down thoughts, ideas and reflections in an exercise book or type them in a word document. The notes are then shared and talked through with a partner or the teacher, and can help form the basis of a later presentation
 - **whole-class activities** such as ‘circle time’ or whole-class games which allow the child to speak publicly in an informal, less threatening environment
 - **using a script.** Asking a scripted question or reading an instruction is less threatening to say aloud than delivering content or opinion that the child has generated.
 - **working in pairs or small groups.** This allows children to speak to 1-4 other children in the form of presenting work to a friend, a one-on-one mini-debate, small group debates and mini-presentations.
 - **60-second presentations** where several children take turns to voluntarily present a short, entertaining oral presentation on a topic drawn from a hat.
- **Use ICT for class presentations.** This enables children who lack confidence to move the focus away from themselves. Children can be encouraged to use presentation software such as PowerPoint or Keynote, or may create and present a short, pre-recorded video of themselves.
- **Teach how to effectively use presentation software such as PowerPoint:**
 - **use prompt cards or the laptop screen slides** as prompts or cues, rather than reading from them
 - **use key points** rather than long sentences
 - **use images and symbols** instead of text or to support text
 - **only turn away from the audience to read quotes**
 - **ensure the slides can be seen from the back of the room.**
- **Run relaxation exercises regularly with your class prior to sessions involving public speaking** to assist the presenters to relax. Teach relaxation exercises such as progressive muscle relaxation, guided visualisation or deep breathing to the whole class. The guided visualisation should focus on the child seeing themselves as a confident public speaker. Encourage students to visualise how they would stand, how they would speak, how they would project their voice, how they would smile, how they would thank their audience. The development of relaxation skills can assist the child to cope with any stress associated with public speaking. See Psych4Schools for relaxation activities.



- **Play public speaking games and word games with a focus on having fun.** Adapt and choose topics that are appropriate to your class. In addition, see the resources section for further activities and ideas for speaking confidently.

Specific presentation strategies

The whole class can benefit from direct teaching and guided thinking about presentation skills. Encourage students to think about how they know when someone is a confident public speaker. Show video of exemplary public speakers and ask students to note techniques and other features that were impressive. Consider posture, voice clarity and volume, speed of delivery, pauses, length of sentences and audience engagement. These sound like sophisticated skills but they can be broken down and practised by young children in groups, and modelled to older children. More specific strategies to practise include:

- **Provide the child with strategies to overcome public-speaking fears.** These could include
 - **practicing how to relax**, by telling yourself just before speaking to ‘relax, relax, relax’ and then listen to your own voice when you begin saying the first sentence. Sometimes you might ask your audience to relax a little as they listen
 - **choosing a point in the room at eye level, such as a clock or people’s foreheads, to look at**
 - **imagining the audience members are friendly puppies**
 - **thinking of the class as a small number of groups** rather than a large number of children
 - **encourage the child to practise the talk at home aloud** in front of the mirror several times.
- **Provide reassurance that most people feel nervous** and therefore have an understanding of the difficulty of public speaking, and will want you to do well.
- **Reassure the child who blushes or worries** that if they ‘go red’ that it will probably only last a few seconds and people usually don’t notice. Explain that most people have experienced ‘going red’ and will be understanding if they do notice.
- **Teach tips for public speaking to the whole class:**
 - **start a presentation with a positive statement about the purpose of, or reason for the presentation**
 - **know how to begin and how to end the presentation**
 - **practise the talk aloud several times** using prompt cards
 - **highlight key points on prompt cards** when presenting
 - **number or colour code prompt cards**, with only 3–5 points per card
 - **look up after a key point or after 2–3 sentences**, rather than looking constantly at your notes
 - **make eye contact with a couple of supportive friends** or find two people or objects, one each side, towards the back of the room. Speak to each of these people or objects in turn, slowly shifting your gaze as you speak
 - **use confident body language** such as standing tall, shoulders back, chin up



- **project your voice to the back of the room**
- **on occasion, practise** these tips using poems, nursery rhymes or well-known stories so that some pressure is taken off the content and the exercise becomes a game about the delivery.
- **Allow the child and others to take one or two sips of water** before or while giving the talk to help calm their nerves and to keep their throat, mouth, and lips feeling moist.
- **Encourage the child to take a gentle breath** between key points and use this as a time to look up from notes.
- **Teach about the importance of pauses in public speaking.** For example, pauses and the selective use of silence allow a key point to sink in the listener's mind and allows the speaker to transition from one point to the next.
- **Pre-record a talk for the child who speaks quickly**, so they can hear themselves speak and understand the need to relax and slow their rate of speaking. Encourage the child to slow the delivery and listen to themselves speaking. This will also help the child to gain confidence with the content of the talk. Apps such as LikeSo can be used to help the student monitor how fast they are speaking and their use of 'ums' 'likes' and 'ahhs'.
- **Teach skills explicitly through class games. For example, give each child a card listing** a body posture or action, such as 'slouching', 'looking at the floor', 'standing tall', 'looking at the class', 'read straight off the page without looking up'. Have each child repeat a sentence such as 'I am a confident speaker' (or several sentences on the topic) while doing the action on his or her card. As a class, discuss what it felt like to say the sentence(s) using different postures. How was the delivery affected by each posture or action?
- **Use a rubrics template for assessment.** The child can pool ideas with others and develop criteria for what helps to make a confident presentation. The class can use this as a guide for presenting, for self-assessment or for partner feedback.
- **Use practice sessions and dress rehearsals.** For example, provide opportunities for the child to practice the presentation with you, another teacher or a parent, before presenting more formally to the group or the whole class. This provides an opportunity to develop confidence and build skills before the actual presentation.
- **As confidence in speaking grows, suggest the child practises**
 - **telling a short story or tale that introduces the topic.** Most professional speakers like to tell a short story before they get started on their presentation as a way of relaxing themselves and the audience. A short anecdote provides the opportunity to get the presentation off to a good start.
 - **making eye contact with some members of the audience**, particularly those who show signs of interest. Smile at individuals or small groups, particularly those who may nod or smile while listening. Confidence in speaking often breeds further confidence.



References and resources

Psych4School ebooklets and resources

Full resources are available to Psych4Schools members:

www.psych4schools.com.au/members/children.html.

Excerpts of all ebooklets are available at:

www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resources/wwc

- Working with children who are anxious
- Working with children who are selectively mute (refuse to talk at school)
- Working with children who are shy (revised)
- Working with children who display perfectionistic behaviour
- Working with children who worry excessively
- Working with children with learning disabilities
- Relaxation – Deep abdominal breathing

Picture story books

- Alexander, J. (2017). **Shawn's Show and Tell Tale: A Simple Guide to Public Speaking for Children**. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform: USA.

Books

- Dugdale, S. n.d. **20 Public Speaking games: From fear to fun in 28 ways. Write Out Loud. – Activities for the classroom**. <http://www.write-out-loud.com/public-speaking-games-ebook.html>.
- Nemzof, D. (2016). **Public Speaking for Kids, Tweens, and Teens - Confidence for Life!** Gabberz Publishing: USA.
- Spilsbury, L. (2016). **The Student's Toolbox: Tips for Better Public Speaking**. Hachette: UK.

Websites

- **Write out Loud** – lots of games, tips and information on overcoming public speaking fears <http://www.write-out-loud.com/>
- **TED** – specifically the TED Before public speaking playlist – 9 videos on how to deliver a great public speech. https://www.ted.com/playlists/226/before_public_speaking

Apps

- **Like so (Your personal speech coach)** – uses voice recognition technology to train you to avoid poor verbal habits monitoring your words, and pacing and the use of words like 'um' 'so' etc. <https://sayitlikeso.com/>



Relaxation/Mindfulness

- **Smiling Mind** www.smilingmind.com.au
- **Reachout Breathe app** <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/reachout-breathe/id985891649?mt=8>
- **Headspace app** - <https://www.headspace.com/>

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