How to use the My Ideal School Cards The online version

A guide for school staff and professionals

How to use the My Ideal School Cards online

Before you begin: emotional preparation

Children with selective mutism may feel anxious about a new activity. Some gentle preparation may help the child to feel safe, understood and in control.

- **Explain the activity beforehand.** You could tell the child what might happen, who will be there, where the session may take place and roughly how long it could last. A simple social story might help. There are also some free resources on the website www.listeningbeyondwords.co.uk that might be helpful for introducing the activities to the child.
- **Ask what would help.** The child and their parent or carer may know what will help the child feel comfortable and how they are most likely to communicate during the sessions.
- **Offer simple choices.** The child might choose the room, where to sit, who will join them, or whether to have a drink, snack or comfort item.
- **Build trust first.** Some children may benefit from relaxed sessions with a familiar adult before using the cards. Low-pressure games or shared activities could help.
- **Give a gentle explanation.** You could acknowledge that speaking at school may feel difficult. Explain that the child does not need to speak and that the activity is simply a way to understand their views about school.
- **Follow the child's pace.** Remind the child that they can pause, finish early or choose not to answer. The cards are used to gather their views, not to encourage them to speak.

If the child becomes very still, cannot respond or cannot use their usual way of communicating, they may be feeling overwhelmed. It may be better to wait or pause the activity. Reduce demands and help the child feel safe. You can return to the activity when they are able to communicate comfortably.

Practical preparation

It may be helpful to have the following available before the session:

- paper, pens and pencils;
- sticky notes;
- a whiteboard and pens, if useful;

A quiet, familiar and comfortable space may help the child to feel at ease. Where possible, reduce interruptions and allow enough time so that the child does not feel rushed. Agree a simple way for the child to ask for a break or stop, such as pointing to a card or using an agreed gesture. Keep sessions flexible and finish at a natural stopping point if the child becomes tired, uncomfortable or overwhelmed.

Using the cards for an in-depth piece of work

Part 1: The Non-Ideal School

Part 1 of the Ideal School activity involves helping the child to create an understanding of their "non-ideal school". This means an imaginary school that they would not like to attend.

Introducing the activity

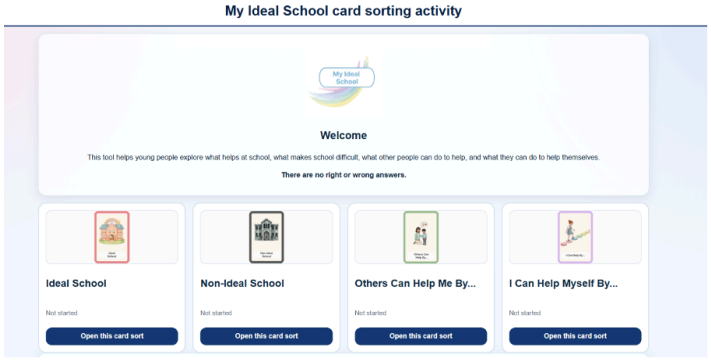
You could begin by saying:

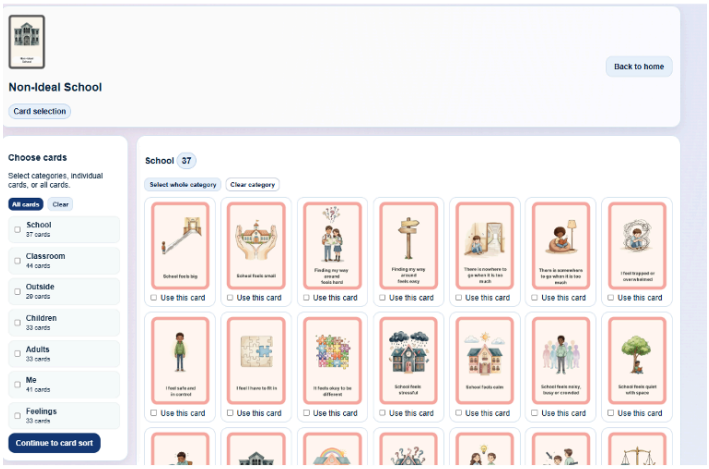
> ***"I would like you to imagine a school that you would not like to go to. It is not a real school."***

It may be helpful to adapt this language so that it is meaningful and accessible to the child. For example, you might call it a "nightmare school", a "not-nice school", or use the child's own words.

The online platform

After logging into the online platform you should be taken to the home screen. On the home screen, select the non-ideal school card sort to open the card selection page.





Under ‘Choose cards’ on the left-hand side, use the tick boxes to select one area, such as school, several areas, all areas, or a small selection of relevant cards from across the areas.

Choosing an area to explore

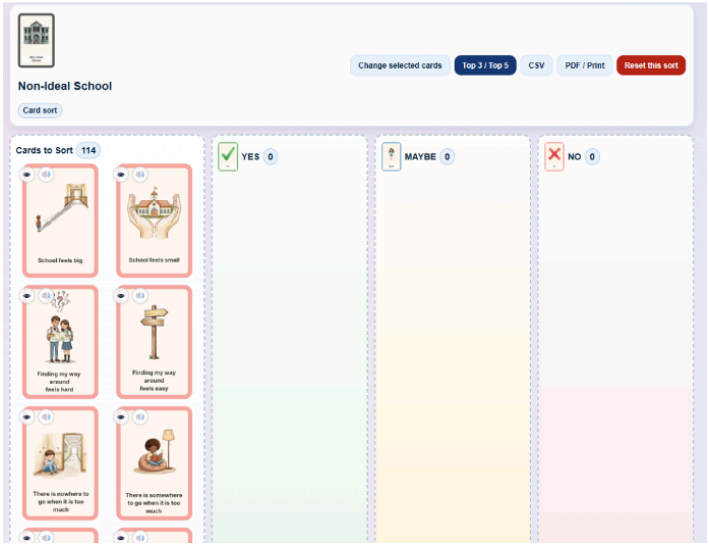
The Ideal School cards are grouped into seven areas. The colour of each heading card shows which category the cards belong to:

- **School** – coral
- **Classroom** – blue
- **Adults** – purple
- **Children** – yellow
- **Outside** – green
- **Me** – turquoise
- **Feelings** – pink

Choose a manageable number of cards based on the child and the time available. To build a rich, holistic picture of the child’s perspective on school, consider completing the activity over a series of sessions, for example, three to six sessions with a few cards each time. The child may wish to begin with an area that seems particularly relevant to them, such as children, adults or the classroom, and spend more time exploring it. Once the cards have been selected click ‘Continue to card sort’.

Sorting the cards

The selected cards are now ready to sort. Encourage the child to take the lead, using their preferred way of responding. For example, they may prefer to point while you move the cards.



Explain that there are no right or wrong answers. For this activity, Yes means the feature would be in the non-ideal school, No means it would not be there, and Maybe means the child is unsure. As the child clicks on the cards ask:

> ***"In your non-ideal school, would there be...?"***

Explore the card with the child, then invite them to place it under Yes, No or Maybe.

Some children may think that Yes and No mean right and wrong. Check that they understand the labels. If a card is unclear, explain it with a short, concrete example. Repeat the opening question when needed to remind the child that they are imagining a school they would not like to attend.

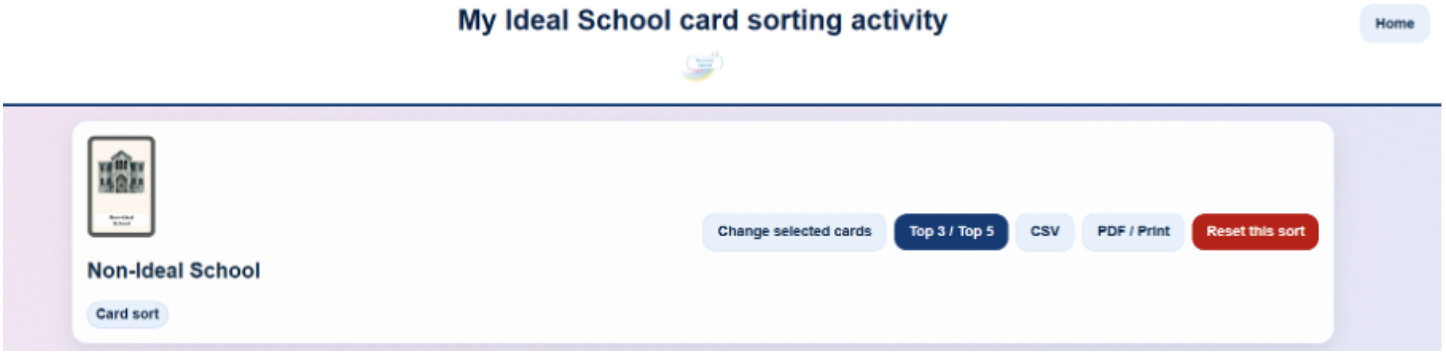
If the child is unsure, the card can be placed under Maybe. If they choose the Other card, they could write or draw their idea, communicate it in another way, or share it through a trusted adult.

Accessible Features



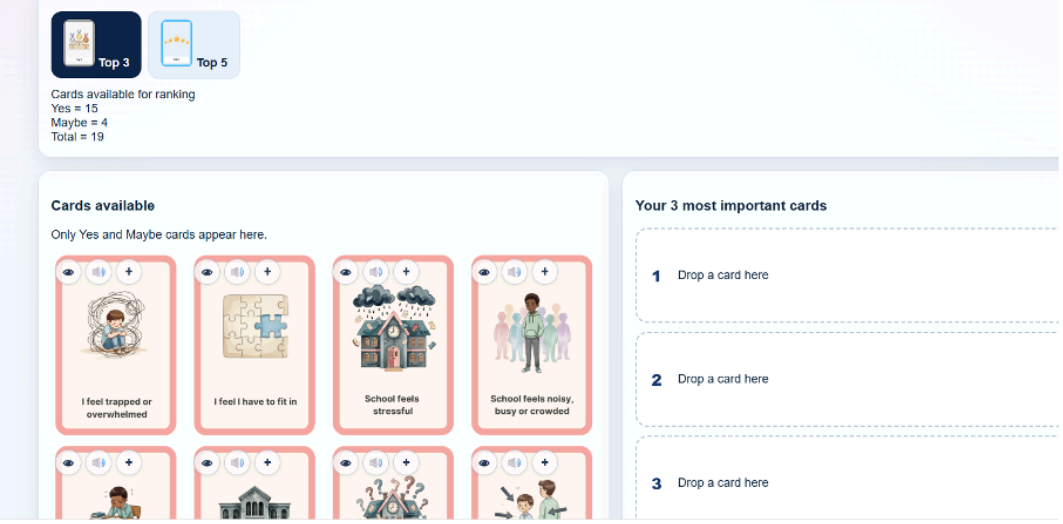
The cards include accessibility options to support the child's preferences and needs. Select the speaker symbol to hear the card read aloud, or the eye symbol to increase the size of the image and text. Audio is also available in the enlarged view.

Identifying what matters most



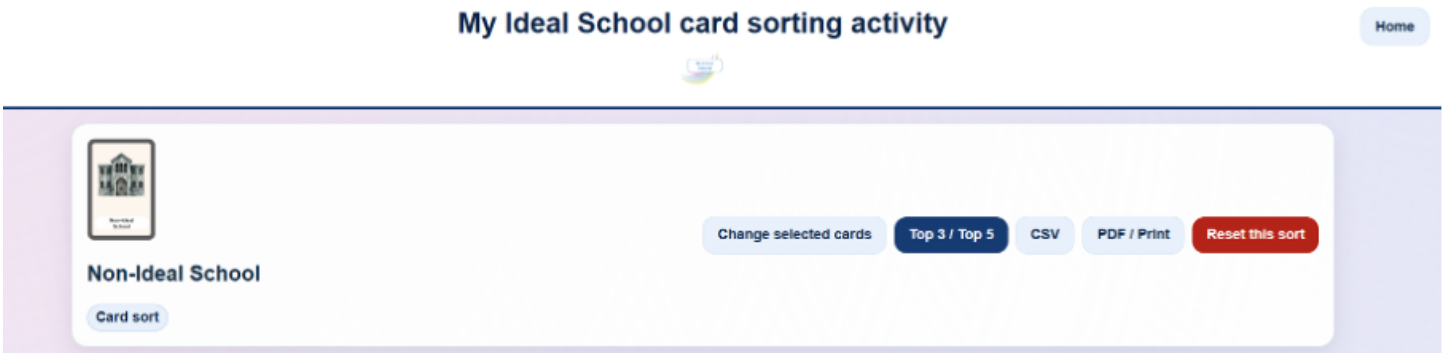
Once the card sort is complete, invite the child to choose the top three or five things that would feature in their non-ideal school. Use the top three or top five option in the toolbar at the top. Five may be appropriate if there are many cards in the ‘Yes’ pile, while three may suit a smaller selection. Wherever possible, let the child choose which option they would like to use.

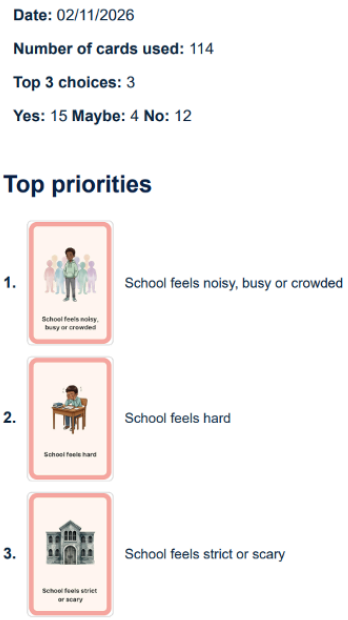
Invite the child to drag and drop their top three or five cards into the boxes provided, choosing the things that are most important to include in their non-ideal school.



Tracking Progress

When the activity is complete, you can save or print the selected cards by clicking on the ‘Print PDF’ button in the toolbar at the top. This provides a record of the features the child would not want in their school.





Date: 02/11/2026

Number of cards used: 114

Top 3 choices: 3

Yes: 15 **Maybe:** 4 **No:** 12

Top priorities

1. School feels noisy, busy or crowded
2. School feels hard
3. School feels strict or scary

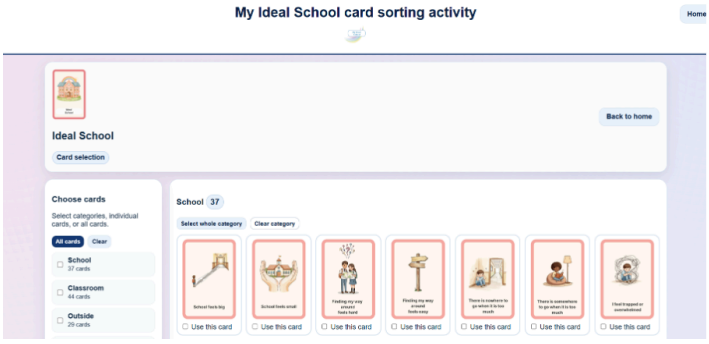
The example printout shows how the summary is presented. The CSV option also lets you export the results in a format that can be opened in Excel.

Once you have finished, select ‘Back to sorting board’ to return to the home screen.

Repeat the same process with the remaining areas of school, at a pace that feels comfortable for the child. One or two areas may be enough for a session. At the end, record which area was completed and which cards the child selected so that the next session can begin from the same point.

Part 2: The Ideal School

Once the child has explored all seven areas of their non-ideal school and identified their top three or five choices in each area, you could repeat the same process to help them imagine a school they would like to attend.



On the home screen, select the ideal school card sort. Follow the same process as for the non-ideal school, but this time ask the child to think about a school they *would* like to attend—their ideal school. Once the sort is complete, invite them to select and drag their top three or five cards into the boxes. You can save or print a PDF to keep a record of their choices. Select ‘Back to sorting board’ to return to the home screen. Look back at the instructions in part 1 for more information about how to select, sort and save the card choices.

Part 3 (optional): Thinking about the child's current school

If you are completing the full activity, you can next help the child compare their current school with their ideal and non-ideal schools.

Using a scale

Explore where the child's current school sits between their non-ideal and ideal school.

> ***"When we thought about your ideal school, you said there would be... In your non-ideal school, you said there would be... Now we are going to think about your current school."***

Place a sheet of paper in landscape orientation and write 'Non-ideal school' on the left and 'Ideal school' on the right. You can use printouts of the child's top cards as prompts, or invite them to draw or write their choices. Ask the child to show where their current school sits between the two, using a mark, drawing, pointing or sticky note. Label this position 'Now'. You could begin with school as a whole and then, if helpful, repeat the scale for individual areas such as adults, children, the classroom or outside spaces. The child can point, place a sticky note or ask a trusted adult to place the marker for them.

Next, ask where they would like their current school to be and label this position 'ideal'. Draw a line between the two positions to show the change they would like.

Explain that you will now think together about what could help make their current school more like their ideal school.

Exploring the child's choices

This may help to identify which parts of school are working well and which parts could feel more comfortable. For example, if the child places the classroom closer to their non-ideal school, it may be useful to explore what could help move it closer to their ideal school.

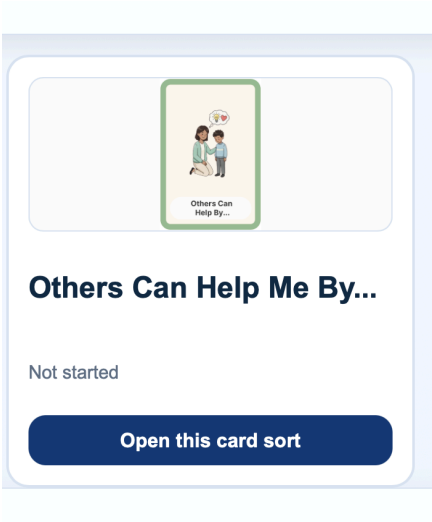
The child may also identify aspects of their current school that already feel ideal. These positive features can help adults understand what the child values and what is already working well. Where appropriate, successful approaches could be used more consistently in other parts of school.

It may be helpful to keep a record of the completed scale through written notes or, with appropriate permission, a photograph.

Part 4: Exploring helpful factors

Others can help me by....

"We have thought about what your ideal and non-ideal schools would be like, and we have compared these with your current school. You told me that... [briefly remind the child of some of their key ideas]. Now we are going to think about what might help school feel a little better for you. First, we will look at what other people, such as adults or other children, could do to help. Then we will think about whether there is anything you could do that might help school feel a little better."

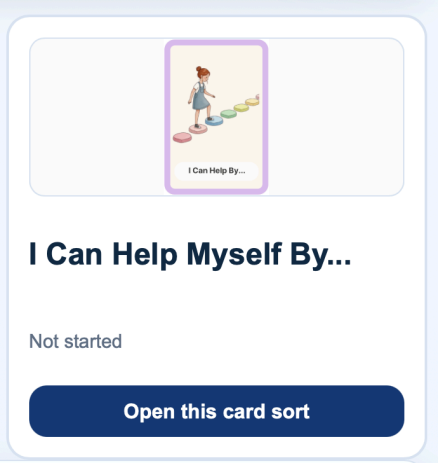


Return to the home screen and select the green 'Others can help me by' card sort. On the card selection page, choose relevant cards or select all cards. Follow the same sorting process, asking the child whether each suggestion could help make their current school more like their ideal school. Sort the cards into 'Yes', 'No' or 'Maybe', then invite the child to choose their top three or five. You can print or save a PDF, or export the results as a CSV file for Excel. Select 'Home' or 'Back to sorting board' to return.

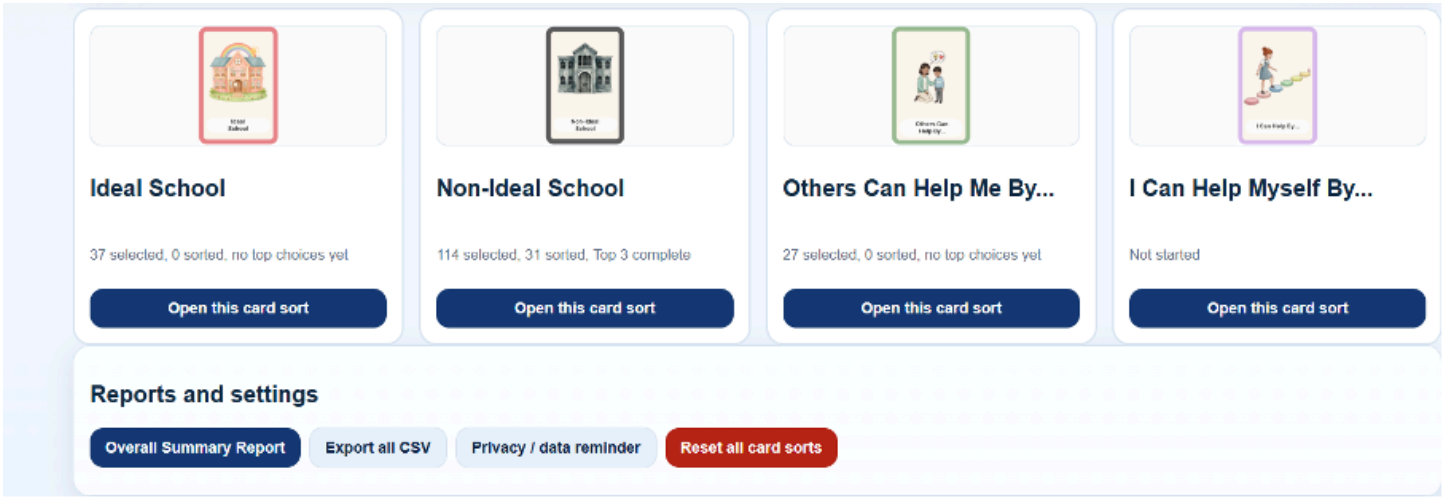
If the child selects the 'Other' card, you could gently explore their own idea if they feel comfortable. As open-ended questions can sometimes feel difficult, the child might prefer to draw or write their idea, communicate it through a trusted adult, or think about it with their parent or carer and share it later.

I can help myself by

Use this card sort to explore what the child could do to help make school more like their ideal school. Follow the same process, then invite the child to choose their top three or five cards. You can print or save a PDF, or export the results as a CSV file for Excel.



Summary Report



Once all the activities are complete you can print an ‘overall summary report’ using the option under reports and settings on the home page. You can add information, notes or context, but this is optional. Follow your organisation’s privacy procedures and consult the website’s GDPR and privacy information before entering personal data. The child can choose a pseudonym, you can use initials, or you can leave these fields blank. The activity data is not stored anywhere other than in your own web browser; please refer to the website’s privacy policy for further details.

Follow-up and action planning

Once the child’s views have been gathered, it may be helpful to arrange a follow-up discussion with the child’s permission. This could involve the child, their parent or carer and relevant school staff.

The child could attend if they feel comfortable, or a trusted adult could share their views on their behalf. Keep the action plan small and realistic.

For each agreed action, record:

- what will happen;
- who will be responsible;

- when it will begin; and
- when it will be reviewed.

It is important for the child to hear what will happen next so that they know their views have been listened to and valued. The plan could be reviewed at least termly to consider whether the support remains appropriate and is making a positive difference.

Considering later targeted support

Once the child feels more comfortable and the agreed changes have had time to become established, the child, their parent or carer and school staff could consider whether they feel ready for more targeted support around speaking.

Any work of this kind should be led by the child, introduced at their pace and broken into small, manageable steps. The Ideal School Cards are not designed to elicit speech. Instead, they can help adults understand and create the conditions in which the child feels safer, more comfortable and better able to participate.

Further guidance can be found in The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, and in Maggie Johnson's collaborative parent–school workbook, which emphasises the importance of adults at home and school working together.

Other ways to use the cards

For a short or time-limited activity

If time is limited—for example, during an EHC needs assessment or pupil voice activity—you do not need to complete every part of the activity.

You could choose a small number of relevant cards or focus on one area, such as the classroom or adults. The child can sort each card under Yes, No or Maybe.

The child could then identify the ideas that feel most important. This can provide a brief picture of their preferred learning environment and support at school without completing the full activity.

For a targeted area of work

If an adult who knows the child well has identified one part of school as particularly difficult, the activity could focus on that area or category of the My Ideal School Cards. For example, if outside spaces are challenging, the child could use the outside card deck to create an ideal and non-ideal playground or outdoor area by following the earlier steps.

The scaling activity could then be used to explore how the current outdoor area compares with these two imagined spaces. This may help the child and adults identify practical changes

that could make the area feel safer and more accessible.

As part of transition work

The cards may be particularly helpful when preparing a child for a transition, especially a move to a new phase of education or a new school.

The child's ideal-school choices could be shared with the receiving setting, with the child's and parent or carer's agreement. This could support collaborative planning and help the new environment feel safer, more predictable and more comfortable when the child transitions.

Exploring barriers and additional needs

The cards can support a wider piece of work to understand barriers to a child's access to education and identify possible next steps.

The cards may be useful when a child finds it difficult to attend, take part or manage particular places or activities in school. The full set contains more than 300 cards and can be used flexibly by selecting only those that fit the child and the purpose of the session.

The My Ideal School Cards offer a concrete and structured approach to eliciting the views of children with other communication and emotional needs including anxiety, autism and barriers to education. Choose suitable cards, change the wording where needed and limit open-ended questions if these feel overwhelming.

The cards are intended to be used flexibly. They provide a starting point for understanding the child's experience, rather than a fixed script or complete assessment.

Recording and sharing the child's views

Before beginning, explain in an accessible way how the child's ideas will be recorded, who may see them and why. Seek the child's agreement before taking photographs or sharing their choices. Store notes and photographs in line with your setting's information-governance procedures.

Do not promise complete confidentiality. If the child shares information suggesting that they or somebody else may be unsafe, follow your setting's safeguarding procedures and explain, in a calm and age-appropriate way, that you may need to tell a person who can help.

Things to consider when working with a child with selective mutism

Prioritise comfort and trust

Preparation is especially important when the activity will take place over several sessions. Where possible, the child could work with an adult they already know and trust. It may be helpful to spend time building rapport through relaxed, low-pressure activities before introducing the cards.

The adult should continue to notice how comfortable the child appears. The child may need extra processing time, a break, a shorter session or a different way to respond. If they become very still, stop responding or appear overwhelmed, pause the activity, reduce demands and return to it only when they feel ready.

Look beyond the cards

The discussion does not need to be limited to the cards. Adults who know the child well may have additional ideas, and the child, their parent or carer and school staff could contribute their own suggestions.

The cards were developed from research and literature about the school experiences of children with selective mutism. However, the available evidence is limited, and every child will have their own view of what makes school feel safe and supportive. The child's perspective should remain central. Ideas from adults who know them well can support, but should not replace, their voice.

If the child speaks

If a child speaks during a session, respond naturally and calmly. Continue the interaction as you normally would, without drawing attention to the fact that they have spoken. Although this may feel like significant progress, an excited reaction, praise or questioning could increase the child's self-consciousness or anxiety.

You could acknowledge what the child has said through an ordinary response and continue with the activity. Avoid asking them to repeat the word or sentence, speak more loudly, or say it to somebody else. It may be helpful to discuss the child's progress privately with their parent or carer and relevant professionals later, rather than in front of the child.

Keep questions low pressure

Open-ended or direct questions, particularly questions beginning with "why", may feel overwhelming for some children. Use your knowledge of the individual child to judge what they can manage. They may find it easier to respond by pointing, writing, drawing or using communication technology.

Where helpful, you could offer two simple possibilities, for example:

“I wonder if it might be this, or this?”

The child can indicate whether either option feels right. Allow plenty of time and avoid asking several questions in quick succession. If the child appears uncomfortable or stops responding, move on rather than pressing for an answer.

Remember the purpose of the cards

The Ideal School Cards are not a therapy. Their purpose is to help adults understand the child’s experience and identify changes that may help them feel safer, heard and understood within their environment.

For a child with selective mutism, creating these supportive conditions may be an important foundation before any carefully planned, child-led work around speaking is considered. Further guidance is available in The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens.