How to use the My Ideal School Cards

A guide for school staff and professionals

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Who are the cards for?

The Ideal School Cards are designed for children and young people aged 7–16. These instructions are a guide for school staff and external professionals, such as educational psychologists (EPs) and speech and language therapists (SaLTs). Although the cards were originally developed from literature about the school experiences of children with selective mutism, they have also been used successfully with children and young people experiencing anxiety, barriers to education and neurodivergence. The set contains more than 300 cards to choose from. They are designed to be used flexibly and at the child's pace. This flexibility, together with the different ways in which the cards can be used, means that the activity can be adapted for a range of contexts and needs.

This guide begins by explaining how the cards were originally used during the research. This offers a more in-depth way of working with a child over time, usually across a series of approximately five to eight weekly sessions of around 30-45 minutes. The subsequent section offers other ways to use the cards and illustrates how the activity can be shortened or adapted for different contexts, purposes and needs.

The steps below describe the fuller approach used during the research. They can be spread across approximately five to eight sessions, depending on the child's pace and needs. You do not need to complete every stage in one sitting.

Before the first session: quick checklist

- Agree the purpose of the activity and who will use the information.
- Explain the activity to the child and gain their agreement to take part.
- Agree how the child can pause, stop or ask for a break.

- Identify the child's preferred way to communicate.
- Choose a familiar adult, suitable room and manageable session length.
- Decide how ideas will be recorded and stored.
- Agree with the child and their parent or carer who the information may be shared with.

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.

Check how the child can respond

The child does not need to speak during the activity. Before you begin, think about how they can comfortably show their choices. They might:

- point to or select a card;
- nod or use a gesture;
- draw or write;
- use pictures, symbols or communication technology; or
- communicate through a trusted adult or peer.

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:

- the Ideal School cards;
- the Helpful Statements cards;
- paper, pens and pencils;
- sticky notes;
- a whiteboard and pens, if useful;
- the pictures, symbols or communication aids the child usually uses; and
- a camera, if photographs would help and permission has been given.

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.

Choosing an area to explore

The Ideal School cards are grouped into seven areas:

Card categories and colours

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

Keep the cards in seven separate piles and place the matching coloured heading card on top of each pile. Put the piles where the child can see them. The areas are often explored in the order shown above, but the child could choose which area to begin with.

Once an area has been chosen, the other cards could be moved aside so that there is enough space for sorting. A large sheet of paper may also be useful for recording the child's ideas across the sessions.

Sorting the cards

Put the Yes, No and Maybe cards where the child can see them. 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. Turn over one card at a time and 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.

If the child finds the sorting tricky

Some children may think that Yes and No mean right and wrong. Check that they understand the labels.

Some children may find the concept of double negatives difficult, or may need support when switching between thinking about their non-ideal school and their ideal school.

If needed, gently remind the child which school you are exploring before reading each card. For example:

"Just checking, we're thinking about your non-ideal school. Would there be kind people there?"

If the Yes / No / Maybe choices make the task too complicated, simplify it further. Place down only the heading card you are currently exploring, for example, 'non-ideal school'. Read each

card one at a time. If the child thinks it belongs in their non-ideal school, they can place it under the heading. Cards that do not belong can simply be placed in a separate pile. The same approach can then be used when exploring the child's ideal school. In these situations, have used the concept of a 'bin' where cards that feel less relevant to their idea of a non-ideal/ideal school can be placed. You could use a small basket, box or container to represent the bin and make the activity more visual and concrete. These cards can then be set aside, as they will not be needed during the next part of the activity.

If a card is unclear, explain it with a short, concrete example that might be meaningful to the child. 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.

Remember: This activity is flexible. Draw on your knowledge of the child, alongside your professional skills and experience, to adapt the language, prompts and number of choices so that the activity is as accessible as possible for them.

Identifying what matters most

When all the cards in one area have been sorted, focus on the cards in the Yes pile. Invite the child to choose either the three or five cards that matter most to them. They can place these under the Top 3 or Top 5 heading card, in order of importance. You do not need to use both options. A top three may work well when there are only a few cards in the Yes pile, while a top five may be more useful when there are more cards to choose from.

These choices may help to show which features of an undesirable school feel most significant to the child. It may be useful to keep the selected cards together or, with appropriate permission, take a photograph so that their key ideas are remembered accurately. You could also invite the child to record their ideas creatively. For example, they might draw them if they enjoy creative activities or write them on a large sheet of paper. This can be added to across the sessions, gradually creating a picture of the school that the child can take ownership of.

Repeat the same process with the remaining areas, 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.

Introducing the activity

You could say:

> ***"We have thought about a school you would not like to go to. Now we are going to think about the kind of school you would like to go to. We could call this your ideal school or your dream school. It does not have to be a real school."***

The child might enjoy choosing their own name for the school. Some children may find it difficult to switch from thinking about the non-ideal school to the ideal school. It may therefore be helpful to check their understanding regularly and repeat the question:

> ***"In the school you would like to go to, would there be...?"***

Then read the statement on the card.

Sort the cards and choose the most important

Use the same sorting process. In this activity, Yes means the feature would be in the child's ideal school, No means it would not be there, and Maybe means the child is unsure. Turn over one card at a time. When all the cards in an area have been sorted, invite the child to choose either their top three or top five from the Yes pile and place them in order under the matching heading.

This can help to build a clear picture of what matters most to the child. As before, their chosen cards could be recorded by writing or drawing their ideas on a large sheet of paper or, with appropriate permission, by taking photographs. They could also use art or another creative method to put together a picture of their ideal school.

Depending on the child's anxiety levels, you may then be able to explore why their top three or five choices are important to them. You could use a gentle prompt such as,

> ***"I wonder what it is about this card that is important to you?"***

The child may find open-ended or "why" questions difficult. Pictures or simple choices may help. If the child is unsure or appears uncomfortable, avoid pressing for an answer and move

on. If you know the child well, you could offer two possible explanations and invite them to show which, if either, feels right.

Part 3: 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

On a large sheet of paper:

1. Put the Non-Ideal School card on the left.
2. Put the Ideal School card on the right.
3. Draw a line between the two cards.

It may also be useful to have the child's three or five most important choices from each earlier card set nearby.

You could remind the child of some of the ideas they have already shared:

> ***"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."***

Invite the child to place a marker on the line to show where their current school feels it belongs. 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.

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

For this stage, you will need the Helpful Strategies cards. It may also be useful to have the child's three or five most important choices from each earlier area nearby.

The scaling activity may already have highlighted areas where further support or changes could make school feel safer and more comfortable.

What adults could do

"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."

Place the Yes, No and Maybe cards where the child can see them. Begin with the purple 'Others can help by...' cards. Explore one card at a time and invite the child to consider whether the idea might help. Here, Yes means it may help, No means it may not help, and Maybe means the child is unsure. They could then choose their top three or top five ideas.

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.

What the child could do

You could then explore the 'I can help by' cards and invite the child to identify any ideas that might help school feel more manageable. Again, they could select the three or five cards that feel most important.

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.