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**South West
Yorkshire Partnership**
NHS Foundation Trust

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Selective (Situational) Mutism Information and Advice for Families

What is Selective Mutism?

- Selective Mutism is also called situational mutism.
- Children and young people who have Selective Mutism can speak confidently and freely to some people e.g. close family and friends but are unable to speak at all, or speak only minimally, around other people and in other places e.g. school, health appointments, out in the community.
- Selective Mutism is not a choice or normal 'shyness'. They have developed anxiety around talking to anyone outside their comfort zone.
- When there is an expectation or pressure to speak, children with Selective Mutism may experience a 'panic' response. They may avoid the need to talk or freeze and become unable to speak.
- Children with Selective Mutism may have difficulties talking to their teachers, health professionals, specific family members, family friends and sometimes their classmates.

What causes Selective Mutism?

- Research suggests that Selective Mutism develops in the same way as other anxieties, with both genetic and environmental factors thought to be involved.
- Parents / carers do not cause Selective Mutism.

Who has Selective Mutism?

- It usually develops in early years but can also start later.
- It is more common in girls than in boys.
- It is more common in children from multilingual families.
- Children and young people with Selective Mutism are more likely to have other speech, language or communication needs (SLCN), other developmental differences e.g. autism, or other mental health conditions.

Advice for Parent and Carers of Children and Young People with Selective Mutism

Children and young people with Selective Mutism need a 'Selective Mutism friendly' communication environment. They need to know that:

- there's no pressure or rush for them to speak
- they will be able to talk in their own time.

For children whose anxieties are not yet entrenched, this environment can lead to considerable progress with confident communication.

You can help by:

- **Reassuring** your child in an accepting and relaxed way that it can feel scary to talk sometimes, but that it will get easier. Reassure them that no one will make them talk until they are ready.

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With all of us in mind.

- **Talking openly** to your child about their worries and anxieties. It is helpful to acknowledge what they are experiencing and validate their feelings. It can be helpful to know that other people have worries too and that they are not alone. It can also be helpful to know that anxieties can be overcome and set the expectation that the child's situation is only temporary.
- Giving **praise** for all the things they do well and **recognise bravery**. Take the focus away from their talking and instead provide praise for other things e.g. helping their sibling, completing their homework. Be genuine and specific. For example, "You're really good at helping your friends", "You're so good at this game!".
- **Building resilience** – let the child be independent and do things for themselves; this includes ensuring they can participate in all activities **without needing to speak**. Show them that it's OK to make mistakes and support them to solve their own problems; this will let them know that they can do things for themselves and believe in themselves.
- **Preparing them for any changes** to routine or for new situations e.g. moving to a new class or school. Anxious children may struggle to cope with new routines and changes and often benefit from being given information and reassurance. They may need to meet new teachers and staff and visit their classroom to help them prepare for the transition to a new class. Reassure them that no one will make them talk, but they can talk when they're ready.
- Having the **same boundaries** as you do for other children/siblings who don't have Selective Mutism.
- **Allowing your child to speak through you or other trusted adults or children** as a 'stepping stone' until they are confident talking to others.
- **Educating others to understand** that Selective Mutism is not the child being 'stubborn' or making a choice not to speak. Help others recognise that worries can be overcome by allowing the child to take small steps forward at their own pace.
- **Not answering for your child** as this supports the idea that talking is scary and needs to be avoided.

Instead, try this strategy when someone asks your child a question:

Step 1 Wait for a full 5 seconds. *If your child answers (a nod of the shake or head is fine) then add a comment and move on. If they don't answer, move onto step 2...*

Step 2 If there is no response, make it a private conversation between you and your child. You can:

- Repeat the questions to them, or
- Turn it into a choice 'X or Y?'
- Rephrase the question to allow a 'yes' or 'no' response (or so they can nod / shake their head)

Step 3 Wait another full 5 seconds for your child to respond. *If they respond (using words or gestures is OK) then make a comment and move on. If not, move onto step 4...*

Step 4 Move the conversation on without answering. You could do this by saying something like 'tell me later' or just changing the subject to something else.

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Using this approach will help the child to learn that:

- Questions are for the person asked, not anyone else
- They will get good at answering if they keep trying
- It's not a big deal if they don't answer and no one will mind

WAIT → REPEAT/REPHRASE → WAIT → MOVE ON

Advice for Other People Involved with your Child

Pass this information onto grandparents, other extended family, family friends, health professionals, extra-curricular group leaders or anyone else involved with your child.

- **Remove all pressure and expectation away from talking.** Provide a relaxed environment for children to join in without the need to talk until they are ready.

Children with Selective Mutism have a specific anxiety around talking in certain situations so even well intentioned, gentle encouragement, bribery or offers of rewards will not help the child to speak. This could:

- create pressure to speak.
 - result in the child experiencing increased anxiety.
 - lead to increased avoidance of talking situations.
 - further entrench the child's worries around speaking.
- **Do not ask direct questions and instead use commentary-style talking.** Talk about what you're doing together. Don't expect answers from them. Using phrases like "I wonder..." helps provide chances to speak, without adding too much demand. For example, "I wonder what you had for dinner."
- **Accept all the child's attempts to participate and join in**, including gestures and whispering. Provide opportunities for use of nonverbal communication as a 'stepping stone' until they are able to speak e.g. writing down answers or using pictures. Ensure that others accept and respond to all attempts a child with Selective Mutism makes to communicate and reply to them in a normal and natural speaking voice as if they had spoken.

Other Speech, Language and Communications Needs

It may be more difficult to identify other speech and language needs a child may have due their worries around talking. If you think there are other speech, language and/or communications needs ask for a referral to children's speech and language therapy.

More Information

Websites:

- **The Selective Mutism Resource Association (SMiRA):**
<https://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/>

www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk

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- **Kent Community NHS trust:** <https://www.kentcht.nhs.uk/childrens-therapies-the-pod/speech-and-language-therapy/selective-mutism/>
- **Confident children:** <https://www.confidentchildren.co.uk/>

Books:

- **The Selective Mutism Resource Manual, second edition (2016)** by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, Speechmark
- **Can I tell you about Selective Mutism?** By Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- **My friend Daniel doesn't talk** by Sharon Longo, Speechmark
- **Bravery grows** by Daisy Geddes and Dr.Melissa Giglio
- **My Beautiful Voice** by Joseph Coelho