

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Selective (situational) Mutism information and advice for schools

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 schools and setting for 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:

- **Removing 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. For example, allowing hands-up to answer the register, talking in unison, visuals to make lunch choice.

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.
 - **Providing daily 1-1 time with a key-person** to allow the child to build a rapport and a relationship with a key adult. The child should be given consistent opportunity for daily, unpressured 1-1 time with this adult to help build a trusting relationship with an adult in school that they can go to if they need support.
 - **Acknowledging and Reassuring** the 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.
 - **Talking openly** to children 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.
 - **Smile** and show children how to laugh, relax and have fun!
 - 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 friend, 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.
 - **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.
 - **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.

- **Ensuring they can access the toilet, meals, drinks, help and first-aid** without needing to talk. Agree a procedure with them for when they feel ill or upset.
- **Allowing your child to speak through you or other trusted adults or children** as a 'stepping stone' until they are confident talking to others.
- **Never singling them out or putting them on the spot.** Reassure them in private that you will not single them out in class to read aloud or answer questions unless they would like to be chosen. Let them know they can talk when they're ready, but until then just to have a good time and join in any way they can manage.
- **Supporting friendships** and ensuring that other children do not put pressure on them to talk. Consider educating class about Selective Mutism, worries and anxieties in circle time using children's books. If other children comment or ask about why the child doesn't talk, let them know how they can help. For example, you could say "X will talk when they're ready. You can be a good friend by waiting for it to happen".
- **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.
- **Be aware** some children and young people may have had Selective Mutism for several years and their fears may be significantly more entrenched. Some children and young people are also more likely to have other anxiety disorders such as social anxiety disorder, general anxiety. Referrals can be made to appropriate mental health services for support e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), educational psychologist or clinical psychologist.
- **Find out from the young person about how best you can help in class and find out what they are comfortable with.** Each subject teacher could do this as it may differ from lesson to lesson, or this could be coordinated and disseminated by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator. Check in regularly. Remember that these young people may have significant difficulties communicating comfortably with you, so consider gathering information with help from parents and other means e.g. through questionnaires, writing / emails, speaking through parent/friend.

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 make 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