

Selective Mutism

What is it?

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder where an individual is unable to speak in certain social situations, such as in school or in a peer group, but speaks to a small circle of people usually involving family members. It usually occurs in childhood but, if left untreated, can continue throughout adulthood. Selective mutism affects around 1 in 140 children and is more prevalent in girls and children learning a second language.

It is important to note that they are not choosing to not speak at certain times, but rather they are unable to speak. The social situation they are in triggers a freeze response with feelings of panic that causes talking to be impossible. Individuals with selective mutism can talk to people they feel comfortable with if no one else is around to trigger the freeze response.

Signs and Symptoms

Signs of selective mutism usually appear in early childhood, between the ages of 2 and 4. It becomes particularly noticeable when they start interacting with people outside of their family for example nursery. The main warning sign is freezing when they are talking to someone out of their comfort zone. It is unlikely to occur with people they know very well. Other signs to look out for are:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Appearing nervous, socially awkward or uneasy
- Being shy and withdrawn
- Being clingy
- Appearing stiff, tense or poorly coordinated
- Showing anger when their parents ask them questions about their day or act out when they get home from school

There are different levels of selective mutism. Some children can say a few words, can make gestures such as nodding for yes in social situations, or can write things down. In contrast, others do not use any form of communication at all.

Suggestions for Parents

It is important that children are diagnosed early on in order to access support that can reduce their anxiety response. Family based behavioural interventions offered through (what service offers that?) can be very effective, therefore try and seek a formal diagnosis and support from a speech and language therapist or paediatrician if needed.



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Strategies that may help are:

- **Don't ask too many questions, especially in public.** It may cause their anxiety to rise and will make it less likely they will speak.
- **Give your child more time to speak.** Often individuals will jump in and ask more questions or provide more information if someone takes too long to respond. Those with selective mutism often have a speech delay so give them enough time to respond (around 5 seconds).
- **When they do speak or interact with others don't act surprised,** respond warmly as you would if another child reacted the same way.
- **Notice and privately praise their attempts to interact with people,** whether this be verbal or non-verbal (e.g. waving, smiling, and passing a toy). It is best to do this praise privately and not publically as this may embarrass them.
- **If you see them getting anxious and beginning to panic intervene.** Where possible explain what they were trying to do e.g. "I can see you are trying to answer my question, are you trying to say..." Praise them for attempting it later on.
- **If they have spoken quietly it is good practice to repeat back what they have said** so they know they have been heard and understood, especially when in a bigger group.
- **Try not to let the child know you are worried about their inability to speak out** or look anxious at their attempts, the child will pick up on this and possibly their anxiety will increase.
- **Rewarding a child to speak will not work.** It is not something they are choosing to do or not do.
- **Don't avoid taking them to social situations such as family gatherings.** However it may be best to ask friends and family to allow the child to warm up to them in their own time. It's best they don't ask the child direct questions straight away.

Useful websites / Resources

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/selective-mutism/>

<https://findingourvoices.co.uk/>

<http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/information/information-for-parents/>

<https://childmind.org/guide/parents-guide-to-sm/>

These websites can help you find professionals to support in your area:

<https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy#section-4>

<https://www.asltip.com/>

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