

Selective Mutism

What is it?

It 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, they are unable to. 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, this will usually not occur with select people they know well. Other signs to look out for are:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Appearing nervous, socially awkward or uneasy
- Shy and withdrawn
- Clingy
- Stiff, tense or poorly coordinated
- They may get angry 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 whilst others make gestures such as nodding for yes in social situations. However, some do not use any form of communication at all, including non-verbal gestures or writing in certain situations.

Suggestions for Schools

- **It is important that children are diagnosed early on** in order for parents and schools to reduce the child's anxiety. Family based behavioural interventions can be very effective, therefore encourage parents/carers to seek a formal diagnosis and support from a speech and language therapist or paediatrician if needed.
- **Avoid asking the child to speak in front of the class** to begin with as this is likely to heighten anxiety. Rather, develop a graded plan to build up to speaking in class. This is likely to need to be different and take varying amounts of time from child to child. A graded plan could include speaking to a member of staff with whom they have a good relationship in the presence of someone they do talk to (usually a family member); slowly increasing the distance the person they already talk to is from the child when

speaking; speaking to staff member alone; speaking to a staff member with a trusted peer, then in a small group.

- **When in class allow multiple methods to respond to questions** (e.g. gestures, writing) and reduce pressure to answer in front of lots of peers, for example ask a question one-to-one after a class discussion.
- **Offer praise especially when a child does respond verbally or non-verbally.** Be specific when praising them, make sure they know what they are being praised for.
- **It is sometimes easier for children with selective mutism to carry out work in smaller groups** as this can reduce anxiety. You could also pair them with a buddy that they trust during these work tasks.
- **When children are unable to respond, accept how anxious they are likely to be and verbally empathise** with how they may be feeling, for example 'it's so hard for you to speak with me, I wonder if speaking here feels scary.'

Useful websites / Resources

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

<https://childmind.org/guide/teachers-guide-to-selective-mutism/>

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

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



This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg