Selective Mutism

Information for Parents

SELECTIVE MUTISM #doyourbrave

Your heart starts to pound

You become very hot

Your body and voice become frozen

You are unable to move or speak

Whether it's spiders, fear of the dark, heights or dogs... most people have experienced a phobia or panic attack at some point in their lives.

This is what it's like for a child with Selective Mutism when someone forces them to talk.

What is Selective Mutism?

Selective Mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder where a child or young person has a phobia of talking to certain people or in certain situations.

Children with Selective Mutism can talk freely when they feel comfortable, such as at home with close family or friends.

But in other situations, such as at nursery or school, they feel frightened that someone might ask them to speak.

What should I look for?

Children with Selective Mutism might:

- Look anxious when under pressure to speak
- Find it difficult to answer to their name in group times or to say hello, goodbye or thank you
- Look 'frozen' when spoken to and may not respond to you in any way
- Find it difficult to look at you when they are feeling anxious
- Do all they can to avoid the need to talk
- Be able to speak freely with close friends or family when no one else is around.

KEY FACTS

Selective Mutism (SM) is not shyness. Shyness is when a child or adult takes some time to warm up to a situation but are able to speak freely when they do.

SM affects 1 in 150 young children. That is at least 1 child in most primary schools.

Both boys and girls can have SM.

In some cases, it can also develop in older children.

SM usually starts when children first leave the family circle, for example to stay with a relative, go into hospital or start nursery.

Children who have SM are no more likely to have been abused than any other child.

It is possible to have both SM and another condition such as an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Children from bilingual backgrounds are more likely to have SM.

If left untreated, SM can continue into adulthood and lead to other mental health difficulties.

Advice to try at home:

The golden rule is... Don't try to get your child to speak! This can have the opposite effect. Instead, remove all pressure on your child to talk.

- Reassure your child that talking will get easier and they don't have to talk until they feel ready.
- It is like any phobia (heights, spiders etc) and it can be overcome in small steps.
- Focus on what they can do, encourage and praise their skills, talents and interests.
- Make sure everyone around them understands their anxiety and doesn't put pressure on them to talk.
- Try not to react or become overly excited when your child speaks, accept it as normal.
- Avoid direct eye contact with your child when they are under pressure as this can increase their anxiety.
- Allow them time to "warm up" to new situations before expecting them to communicate.
- Make sure that no adult applies pressure to talk using bribery, persuasion or negative comments. Never force children to say 'Hello', 'Please', 'Thank you', etc. Social conventions are extremely difficult for anxious children.
- Accept your child's attempts at communication in public e.g. pointing, nodding or choosing a picture.
- Help your child to build friendships by pairing them up with another child on playdates.
- Normalise mistake making. Acknowledge and praise your child for trying new things regardless of outcomes.

It is important not to answer questions for your child as this takes away the opportunity for them to talk.

For more explanation and advice on the best strategies to use please visit the parents section of the SMiRA website. See "what to say when," "the pep talk," Details overleaf...

How to get help for my child with suspected Selective Mutism (SM)

Speak to your child's key person or manager at their nursery/preschool/ childminder. If your child is at school speak to their teacher. The school or setting will also have a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) who will be able to give you more advice.

Advice and further information

Seek advice or information on providing appropriate help from websites and organisations such as:

NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/conditions/ selective-mutism

Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMiRA) www.selectivemutism.org.uk

Reference: The Selective Mutism Resource Manual (2016) by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, Routledge.

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