



Speech and Language Therapy Advice Sheet

Supporting Young People with Selective Mutism in Secondary School

What is Selective Mutism?

Some young people are able to speak confidently in certain situations but may be silent or rarely speak in other situations.

If there is a noticeable difference in the way that a young person is able to speak to certain people and/or in different places and this has continued for over a month (not including the first month of settling into an educational setting) then they can be described as having 'Selective Mutism'.

Selective Mutism is an anxiety about speaking which is like a phobia. Phobias are common and many of us have them e.g. a fear of spiders, birds, heights, flying.

Although this will vary for each young person, most young people with selective mutism are able to speak comfortably with close family at home and with their friends (if other adults are not nearby). However, they are silent or rarely speak to their teachers, to other young people, and to unfamiliar adults.

How to recognise Selective Mutism

Selective Mutism often becomes apparent when a child starts going outside of the home more e.g. when they begin preschool/nursery or school. However, it can be difficult to notice in a busy classroom, especially as a child with Selective Mutism will do their best to avoid unwanted attention that may result in them being expected to speak. By secondary school, it is likely that the young person has always had Selective Mutism. You may notice the following:

- There is a noticeable difference in the way that the young person is able to speak to certain people and/or in different places.

- They may look anxious or appear frozen when expected to talk, despite reassurance from an adult.
- They might avoid situations where they are expected to talk.
- They may be able to communicate non-verbally by pointing and nodding, but if they are very anxious they might not be able to respond at all.
- They might talk in a quiet voice or use shorter sentences but only talk when they have to.
- They may find any attention on them difficult to cope with e.g. when it is their turn in an activity.
- They are likely to find initiating interactions difficult e.g. letting you know they are unwell, upset or need the toilet.

By secondary school, Selective Mutism may begin to present differently as it can generalise into broader anxiety. Please be aware of these other signs:

- Increased school absences due to psychosomatic symptoms e.g. stomach-ache
- Young person avoids eating and drinking or using the toilet in school
- They may appear uninterested, nervous, uneasy, withdrawn
- Difficulty or avoidance interacting socially with peers

It is important to know that:

It is not because the young person is being shy. Young people with Selective Mutism have different personalities - some are shy and some are not. They have developed a specific anxiety about speaking.

It is not a choice or deliberate. They are not being stubborn – they physically cannot speak when their nervous system takes over. Imagine a person with a fear of heights on top of a mountain and the fear they might be experiencing at that moment - they might not be able to move or speak and look frozen.

It is something, which with the right understanding and approach, can resolve.

What Can You Do To Help:

- Reduce any pressure on the young person to speak. This will reduce the feelings of anxiety that makes it so difficult for them to speak. When they are more relaxed, they are more likely to be able to speak.
- Make adjustments so the young person can get their basic needs met such as eating, drinking, using the toilet, and reporting illness. These are best agreed with the young person. For example, some young people with Selective Mutism prefer to sit at the front of the class and some at the back.

- Make sure the young person knows you are not going to put pressure on them. Approach them in private and say something like “I know you find it difficult to talk at school so I am not going to put any pressure on you to speak. We can find other ways. I know you will talk when you’re ready. I won’t put you on the spot but will also make sure that others don’t notice you’re being treated any differently.” Knowing you understand and that there will be no surprises will reduce feelings of anxiety.
- Avoid putting the child on the spot or asking them direct questions in front of the class. Approach them at their desk or have them speak to a friend first and have the friend feedback.
- If you do need to ask a question, consider the type of question you ask. Begin with an open question. If they cannot respond, adapt to a single word answer question. If this is still difficult, give them verbal choices. Finally, adapt to a yes/no question.
- If they say “I don’t know” they might actually know the answer but be unable to say this, especially for longer, more complex answers or emotive questions. Try the strategy above or allow them to write down their answer and come back to them.
- If you need them to get into pairs or small groups, decide a couple of these pairs or groups yourself first. This will avoid singling the young person out and means you have reduced pressure on them to approach and speak to peers. Say something like “George and Ahmed – you work together, Connie and Blessing – you work together. Everyone else find a partner.”
- Consider other options when there is a speaking task in class. Explore these with the young person. For example, have them record their presentation at home and send it to you. Never show the video of them speaking to others unless agreed. If you make adjustments now, these can be applied during examinations in the future.
- Agree on a way the young person can ask for help/clarification. For example, send you an email/message after class. Some young people may like to wear a reversible green/red bracelet to discreetly indicate when they need help so the adult can approach. Remember, starting an interaction is very difficult for a child with Selective Mutism so do not expect this from them.

- Accept the young person's non-verbal forms of communication as valid. Keep alternative communication as natural as possible. For example, gesture or writing rather than symbols
- Remember that if the young person feels comfortable and safe then speaking will happen as a natural result. Work on relationships rather than speaking.

If you have tried using these strategies and you are still concerned about your child's talking you can:

Access further advice and training opportunities on our website, including information on how to make a referral:

<https://www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/childrens-centre/speech-and-language-therapy/>

You can access further information about Selective Mutism from the following websites:

- The Selective Mutism Information & Research Association (SMIRA) www.selectivemutism.co.uk
- When the words won't come out – a booklet about Selective Mutism for teenagers and adults. Available at : <https://www.selectivemutism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/When-the-words-wont-come-out.pdf>

Useful videos:

- Silent Children DVD explaining about SM and showing helpful strategies. Available from SMIRA, info@selectivemutism.co.uk.
- 'My Child Won't Speak' BBC documentary available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm1SOoY57cE).
- Saki Galaxidis talks about overcoming selective mutism on YouTube www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyatBNFI9u4.
- The Dos and Don'ts When Interacting with a Child with Selective Mutism': short film by Lucy Nathanson : www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzlhqoLZwNw
- Video 1 and 2 on Kent Trust website: <https://www.kentcht.nhs.uk/childrens-therapies-the-pod/speech-and-language-therapy/selective-mutism/>