



## Speech and Language Therapy Advice Sheet

# Selective Mutism

### What is Selective Mutism?

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

This often becomes apparent when they start going outside of the home more e.g. when they begin preschool/nursery or school.

If there is a noticeable difference in the way that a child 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 their 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 child, most children 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 children/young people and to unfamiliar adults when out and about with their parents or friends.

### How to Recognise Selective Mutism:

- There is a noticeable difference in the way that the child 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 also find any attention on them difficult to cope with e.g. when it is their turn in an activity or game.
- They are likely to find initiating interactions difficult e.g. letting you know they are unwell, upset or need the toilet.

### **It Is Important To Know That:**

**It is not because children are being shy:** Children with Selective Mutism have different personalities some are shy and some are not. They all have developed a specific anxiety about speaking.

**It is not a choice or deliberate:** they are not being stubborn, they can't speak. 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:**

**At an appropriate moment acknowledge the child's difficulty. Talk about their difficulty as something that you understand, but that it will get easier:**

E.g. "It's a bit tricky for you to talk just now"... "It'll get easier"

**Don't ask the child why they don't speak:** Often they don't know why. They are likely to say to close family "I don't want to" (meaning they don't want to experience the fear/anxiety).

**It will seem odd, but don't talk to the child directly or focus on them:** Especially when you first meet them. Talk to the adult present, talk about the weather, anything! Glance towards them periodically, but don't keep your focus on the child. Say "Hi everyone" as a general greeting (and "Bye all" as you leave).

**Don't ask the child anything!** You can talk 'to' them, but just comment on things e.g. 'I like your...'

**Don't look at the child:** Especially when you're commenting to talk 'with' them. Look at what you are talking about or busy yourself e.g. getting things out of your bag or looking for something.

**Accept the child's spontaneous attempts to communicate non-verbally:** E.g. by pointing or gesturing

**If other people comment that the child does not speak, rephrase what they say in a positive way:** E.g. 'they will talk as soon as they feel ready.'

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

- Look on our website for the 'Quick Reference Guide'. This will guide you when the best time to refer your child to Speech and Language Therapy. The referral forms and further advice sheets are also available on the website:

<https://www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/childrens-centre/your-childs-hospital-journey/therapy-services/childrens-therapy-referral-/>

- You can access further information from the following websites:

The Selective Mutism Information & Research Association (SMIRA)

[www.selectivemutism.co.uk](http://www.selectivemutism.co.uk)

<http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk> - communicating phonics (guide for teachers carrying out phonic screening).

Useful videos:

*Silent Children* DVD explaining about SM and showing helpful strategies. Available from SMIRA, [info@selectivemutism.co.uk](mailto:info@selectivemutism.co.uk).

'My Child Won't Speak' BBC documentary available on YouTube ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm1SOoY57cE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm1SOoY57cE)).

Saki Galaxidis talks about overcoming selective mutism on YouTube ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyatBNFI9u4](https://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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzlhqoLZwNw)).