

## Supporting Reluctant Speakers and Children with Selective Mutism



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- Are you worried about your child's confidence with talking?
- Does your child speak as you would expect in your home but not at nursery/preschool/school or outside of the home?
- Would you describe your child as 'shy' or 'anxious' outside of the home environment?

"The main thing about Selective Mutism (SM) is that I can't talk comfortably with people in every situation. If I'm at home with my parents and close family, I'm fine, and you wouldn't think I had any problem.

But if we go out and other people are around – or people I don't know well come to my home – I get anxious and the words can't come out. It's worst when I am at school, because it's full of people I don't know well."<sup>1</sup>

### What is Selective Mutism (SM)?

Selective Mutism is a consistent failure to speak in specific situations despite being able to speak in other, more familiar situations providing:

- there has been a duration at least one month beyond first month at school or nursery;
- it is not due to lack of knowledge of, or comfort with, the language;
- it cannot be better explained by a communication disorder or any other abnormality.

Children with this disorder:

- sometimes use non-spoken or non-verbal means to communicate and may be willing or eager to perform/engage in social encounters when speech is not required;
- do not initiate or reciprocally respond when spoken to by others (but they may respond minimally);<sup>2</sup>

Selective Mutism is characterised by fear and avoidance of talking to, in front of, certain people. Children and adults with SM do not choose to be silent in the situations in which they cannot speak. They genuinely **cannot speak** because they are too anxious to speak. Almost all children and adults with SM would love to be able to speak in every situation, they cannot. Children may appear shy, sullen, withdrawn at these times, but not true reflection of character.

Please remember:

- A desperation to avoid talking may lead to oppositional behaviour.
- Removing the expectation to speak reduces anxiety and oppositional behaviour.
- It often begins during the transition from home to pre-school/ school and affects approximately 1 in 150 children.

<sup>1</sup> *Can I tell you about Selective Mutism?* Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens (2012) Jessica Kingsley Publishers

<sup>2</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – fifth edition - May 2013 p 195 as described by Maggie Johnson in Selective Mutism - Core training.

## How can settings/schools support people with Selective Mutism (SM)?

Schools can support children/ young people by :

- understanding the condition;
- reassuring them by explaining “*I understand that it can be difficult to talk in some situations and that a worried feeling can make this happen, so there is no expectation to speak until you are ready.*”
- making accommodations - checking the classroom, routines and expectations – when do you expect verbal communication, how can you alleviate anxiety here?
- supporting a plan with the individual and their family;
- offer training around social skills, confidence building and/or assertiveness as appropriate to the individual;
- support with attendance, coming in to school.<sup>3</sup>

For further information for SENCOs, please follow this [link](#).

## How parents/carers support their child with Selective Mutism (SM) at home?

### 1. Ensure that your child feels valued and secure

Children with Selective Mutism get so anxious about talking that their vocal chords freeze and no sound can come out of their mouths. Any anxiety, disapproval or uncertainty they pick up will increase their own sense of guilt, failure and fear about the future – they’ll then tense up and find it even harder to speak.

It’s not just teasing that makes children feel bad about themselves. Repeatedly asking ‘Did you talk today?’ or ‘How did you get on?’ makes children dread going to school in case they let you down. Asking ‘Why don’t you talk?’ may add to their anxiety and imply that they are upsetting you and they may try to avoid talking situations.

It can be helpful to **tell** children why they find it hard to speak at certain times rather than asking questions they cannot answer. Reassure them that everyone grows up with childhood fears and although they find talking difficult right now, they’ll find it gets easier as they get older. Their fear will go away if they get used to talking, one tiny step at a time. Your child needs approval whether they speak or not, so be positive about all their efforts, however small. The calmer you are, the more relaxed your child will be and the quicker they’ll improve.

### 2. Build confidence by focusing on your child’s achievements

In conversations with your friends, your child and yourself, focus on what your child does well. Support them in their interests and creative talents and find ways in which they can comfortably demonstrate their skills to others. It may help your child to overhear you talking positively and casually to others about your child’s achievements.

### 3. Educate family and friends about the nature of your child’s difficulties

Make sure others do not pressure your child to speak and know how to react when he or she does speak (no fuss!). Help others respect alternative forms of communication such as: nodding, pointing, smiling, waving, writing, talking through a friend or parent.

For example: “*Joe needs a little while to warm up, please don’t think he’s being rude.*” or “*Sam’s having a great time and if we just let him join in at his own pace he’ll be able to start talking.*”

*When Gemma is used to everyone she’ll talk as much here as she does at home!*

*Can you please make sure no-one makes a big fuss when Dale starts talking? If you just talk back quietly he’ll find it easy to carry on.*

<sup>3</sup> The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens and [www.ispeak.org.uk](http://www.ispeak.org.uk).

#### **4. Provide an escape route**

If children are anxious about a school trip or going to a friend's house for example, arrange to pick them up at lunchtime so they only go for half the day or say you will phone at intervals to see if they need collecting. Gradually extend the time.

#### **5. Keep busy and have a routine**

Activity and physical exercise are good for mind, body and soul and help to keep anxiety at bay. Sitting around doing nothing increases stress, as does uncertainty about the day's events. Start each day with a plan that includes exercise – whether this is letting off steam after school for younger children, sweeping up leaves or walking the dog for older children.

#### **6. Let children know what is happening**

Warn children of changes to their routine and prepare them for new events by talking through what will happen. Rehearse or make a game of real-life scenarios such as going to the doctors, opticians, McDonalds or ordering a Chinese takeaway. Take it in turns to be the patient, doctor, server, etc and practice/write down phone calls.

#### **7. Make things easier for your child to achieve rather than allowing total avoidance**

If we do things for our children or let them avoid activities completely, we are giving children the message that these things are too difficult and threatening for them, and they should lean on adults to support and protect them.

In short, through our fear of the child failing, we are taking away their opportunities to learn, experience success and become independent. The secret is to make activities easier, shorter or more manageable so that children can feel proud of their achievements.

For example: *Instead of ordering for your child, ask them to show the waiter what they want.*

*Instead of avoiding a party completely, go for the first 10 minutes when it's quiet.*

*Instead of taking something that is offered to your child, ask for it to be put it on the table so your child can take it when they are ready.*

*Instead of turning down an invitation, ask if you can go too as a helper.*

*If children miss school, do not let avoidance become a fun option. Make sure they stay in bed or do schoolwork during school hours rather than play.* Discuss your child's concerns and enlist the school's support to ensure a positive return.

#### **8. Accompany your child but as a general helper rather than their personal assistant**

If the only way your child will attend a school trip, Brownies, football etc. is if you go with them, volunteer yourself as a general helper, make a point of talking to other children and get actively involved to assist socialisation rather than dependency.

#### **9. Help your child offload their stress safely**

Being watchful, anxious and unable to speak for much of the day is a great strain. It's common and can be challenging for the whole family to get the brunt of your child's pent up emotions when they come home from school, but they need you to understand that it is natural to feel this way and to provide a calm, safe place rather than more emotional upheaval. Your child may need a chance to relax completely after school before attempting homework, or a physical outlet for their frustration, for example: trampolining, swing-ball or swimming for example.

When upset, your teenage child may use a flat tone of voice which sounds rude and confrontational. Recognise their anxiety, take a deep breath and talk in a calm gentle tone. If they lash out verbally or physically, calmly reflect "*I'm sorry you've had such a bad day*" and leave them on their own to listen to music, bash a pillow or put it on paper with drawing/writing until they feel better.

When things are calmer, acknowledge their frustration but explain that the family do not have to suffer their outbursts so will keep out of their way if they try to take it out on other people. Discuss alternative outlets and say that if you know what has upset them there may be something you can do to help.

### **10. Show your child it is OK to relax and have fun**

If parents have unrealistic standards when children are outside of the home they may worry about spilling or breaking something, getting food on their hands or faces, touching something unhygienic or making the room untidy. They could get extremely anxious at school or other people's houses where they perceive a different set of standards. They will not be able to tolerate lively, unstructured behaviour or engage in normal messy play like finger-painting, papier mâché or digging for worms.

### **11. Remember that it can be just as scary talking to children as adults**

Help your child play with other children rather than leaving them to get on with it. Join in with them, starting with activities or games where talking is optional, so you can all concentrate on having fun.

### **12. If different languages are spoken at school and home, set a good example**

Your child needs to hear you having a go at speaking the school language at school and with their new classmates. Show them learning is fun and mistakes are OK!

### **13. Make explanations, instructions and reminders visual**

Anxious children quickly feel overloaded, forget things easily and tend to take things literally or at face-value. Anxiety causes 'brain-freeze' so we are unable to take in all we hear and cannot think laterally or rationally. Put things on paper so that children have a checklist to follow rather than trying to remember instructions. If they repeatedly ask the same question for reassurance give them a visual reminder and respond to further questions by asking them to look at this and tell *you* the answer.

### **14. Establish safe boundaries with your child so they can take small steps forward**

Laughing, singing, talking in unison and talking to parents will be a lot easier than talking to other people. But children are often afraid to do these things in case it draws attention to them and leads to an expectation to speak. Reassure your child, for example:

*"Grandma knows you can't talk to her just yet, but it's OK to talk to me and Daddy in front of her."*

### **15. Use telephone and recording devices as a stepping-stone to the real thing**

Talking products and on devices (apps) which respond to a voice can be good for building talking confidence.

Talking photo albums, postcards and toys can make good presents or ways for children to communicate verbally with loved ones outside of their talking circle. Children can personalise greetings cards with a recorded message or make a talking photo album to share.

If children cannot speak to their relatives or teacher face to face yet, they could leave a message on a mobile phone or have a conversation via a 'Talking Pod' or MP3 player. How about encouraging siblings to take it in turns to record the message on your home answerphone? Teachers can listen to children reading to their parents over the phone rather than in the classroom.

### **16. Encourage a very quiet voice rather than whispering**

Accept whispering on the odd occasion if you can genuinely hear and are in a hurry, but try not to lower your head so that your child can whisper in your ear. This easily becomes a habit and another form of avoidance.

If your child wants to talk to you but is worried about being overheard, either:

- turn so that you are blocking your child's view of the person they are concerned about and, maintaining eye-contact, quietly say 'Pardon?' (do not whisper!), or
- move far enough away from the other person so that your child can speak to you face to face rather than in your ear. If you are in the middle of a conversation ask your child to wait a moment before you come and speak to them.

There is no need to explain what you are doing but if your child asks why they can't use a whisper, explain that too much whispering will give them a sore throat. You can even demonstrate that whispering is easier to hear across a room than a very quiet voice!

N.B. This technique only works for parents and people with whom the child has no difficulty talking to when there's no-one else around.

### **17. Ask friends, relatives, shop-assistants etc to speak to your child through you if you know they will not be able to respond directly. For example:**

"What colour would your son like to try on first?"

"Max, what colour would you like to try on first?"

(*Max points to brown shoes*) "He'd like to try on the brown ones please."

If children are relaxed with you in public and know you are not pushing them to talk directly to other people, you will find that they begin to cut out the middle man!

### **18. Push the boundaries, starting with safe strangers**

Do not be afraid to invite your child to speak to a safe stranger, for example: paying for something in a shop. Reassure your child that only a couple of words are needed and there will be no need to have a conversation. Rehearse with your child what we say and negotiate a small reward for afterwards. (*Special time with you costs nothing*).

### **19. Acknowledge anxiety but do not fuel it with an emotional reaction; calmly provide a diversion or clear plan of action**

Children need brief sympathy followed by matter-of-fact guidance and strength – not anger, worried looks or protective cuddles which can just confirm that there is something to be afraid of.

If they have difficulty separating from you, stay but do not cling to them or put them on your lap – explore the room together and find things to do. If appropriate, explain how you or others are going to make situations manageable for your child.

Older children will need to discuss their fears about starting a new school, changing class, going on a school trip etc. Help them to externalise their anxieties by breaking the events down and writing each component on a post-it note. For example: the coach-journey, taking the right clothes, getting to the toilet in time etc. Then sort the post-it notes into three columns:

Things I don't  
have to worry  
about:

Things that  
worry me a  
bit:

Things that  
worry me a lot:

Now you can agree on which part to tackle first and strategies to help. Some post-it notes you will leave to deal with another time but already the anxiety will be out of the child's head and seem more manageable. Unless problems are broken down in this way, children will want to avoid situations completely without understanding the specific source of their anxiety.

### **20. Answer anxiety questions with another question so that your child becomes the problem solver**

Children tend to bombard parents with questions as they try to control their anxiety, For example: "Who's going to be there? How long will it last? Have they gone?" etc.

Instead of answering (which tends to become very circular) ask a question back so that children start to understand their anxiety, for example: “*Is there anyone you are worried about? How long do you think you can manage? Why do you need to know if they have gone? Does it bother you if I use the phone?*”.

## 21. Celebrate your child’s unique qualities

Some children are naturally sensitive individuals who take life seriously and set themselves high standards. The downside is a tendency to be overwhelmed by novelty, change and criticism. The upside is an empathetic, loyal and conscientious nature. When treated fairly and allowed to show their true colours, some children display far more creativity and insight than their peers.

Reference and acknowledgements : Maggie Johnson, Selective Mutism Advisory Service, Kent Community Health NHS Trust


If you have concerns about your child, talk to your child’s setting/school about your concerns. Ask about how your child presents in school. Ask the school staff if they have experience of supporting your child’s needs. The school or your GP may also feel a referral to your local The Speech and Language Therapy Service is appropriate.

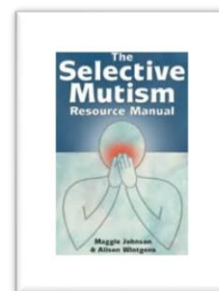
The Social Emotional Difficulties Team in the Specialist Teaching and Pre-school Service have a Parent Helpline where you can receive support in understanding your child’s feelings, where to get further information and how to have effective conversations with school staff.

See the Essex Local Offer for your local contact number:

<http://www.essexlocaloffer.org.uk/content/parent-helpline>

## Useful Resources

- [www.smira.org.uk](http://www.smira.org.uk) Selective Mutism Information & Research Association
- [www.ispeak.org.uk](http://www.ispeak.org.uk) A support group and services for young people and adults with Selective Mutism
- [Help Me to Speak](#) (YouTube documentary in four parts)
- Johnson M. & Wintgens A. (2001). *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual*. Bicester: Speechmark Publishing
- *Can I tell you about Selective Mutism ?* Johnson M. & Wintgens A (2012). Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- SMIRA (2004) *Parents’ Information Pack*. Leicester: SMIRA.
- *What To Do When You Worry Too Much – A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*. Huebner, D. and Matthews B., (2005). Washington: Magination Press.
- *My friend Daniel Doesn’t Talk*. Longo, S., 2006. Bicester: Speechmark Publishing
-  [Essex Selective Mutism Interest Group](#)
- Email enquiries: [EssexSelective.MutismSpecialInterestGroup@essex.gov.uk](mailto:EssexSelective.MutismSpecialInterestGroup@essex.gov.uk)
- **Smiling Mind** app (relaxation and mindfulness for children 5 yrs +)



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