

SEND Bulletin NO.10



Selective Mutism

Children with selective mutism are physically capable of normal speech and comprehension but choose not to speak in certain situations. They may speak, but only in a whisper. Friends will often volunteer to speak for them. Selective mutism is not the same as mutism. Individuals diagnosed with mutism speak to no one.

There are several reasons why children may not speak and it is important that a speech and language therapist should investigate a variety of factors, before deciding on the approaches that would best support them. Factors that cause selective mutism are often anxiety-related. Sometimes it will be a reaction to trauma of some kind.

Occasionally it will be because the child suffers from a hearing impairment and therefore lacks the confidence to speak, except to a few familiar people. Pupils with selective mutism will sometimes speak to friends or siblings but not to adults. Most pupils with the condition make school their silent place.

When a child has chosen to be silent with adults in school, it is difficult to assess their attainment and progress, especially with reading. Situations may also arise when the pupil's selective mutism can make it more difficult or even dangerous for them, such as in the case of illness or injury. It will help if there is one adult, or perhaps a classmate, to whom the child is willing to speak in such circumstances.

Key characteristics

Children with selective mutism may:

- have a fear of people, especially unknown adults
- speak at home with family and close relatives
- be overwhelmingly shy
- find eye contact uncomfortable
- be expressionless and even rigid most of the time
- remain detached and on the edge of things

- have undiagnosed, intermittent or ongoing hearing problems
- feel unable to speak in social situations outside the home

Support strategies

You may need to:

- provide continuous reassurance and encouragement
- foster familiarity between the pupil and a sympathetic teaching assistant on a one-to-one basis, in a quiet place, for a short time every day
- try to avoid settings and situations that may cause anxiety
- establish a safe place in the classroom where the pupil can go when they feel anxious
- create familiar and enjoyable routines and encourage them to take part
- encourage the pupil to take part in non-verbal activities, such as games using picture cards, with a familiar adult and perhaps one other classmate
- encourage verbal or at least gestural responses in safe situations
- make a fun game of cumulatively copying actions, such as nod, stamp, clap, etc, gradually building up until one of you gets it wrong, then maybe add a sound or two
- encourage the pupil to use visual materials as much as possible to extend learning
- make use of puppets in informal situations where the puppet can do the talking
- encourage creative activities, including art, music, design and technology
- encourage the pupil to deal with their anxieties when they feel ready to do so.

Support agencies

- Association for All Speech Impaired Children: www.afasic.org.uk
- Selective Mutism Foundation (USA): www.selectivemutismfoundation.org
- Selective Mutism Information and Research Association:
www.selectivemutism.co.uk

If you have any particular items you would like information on or any interesting information or resources which you would like to share with your colleagues via this fortnightly bulletin please e-mail them to me:

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Many thanks
Anne