

# Children with selective mutism

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## General information

Selective mutism is a consistent failure to speak in specific social situations in which there's an expectation of speaking (for example at school), despite speaking in other situations and lasts at least one month (not limited to the first month at school). The failure to speak is not due to lack of knowledge of, or ease with, the spoken language required in the social situation, nor is it better accounted for by another communication disorder.

Selective mutism interferes with educational achievement and/or with social communication.

## Children with selective mutism:

- Speak comfortably in at least one setting, most often at home with one or both parents, and sometimes with other family members
- Often look blank or expressionless when anxious and may find it difficult to make eye contact
- May not show emotions (smile, laugh or show true feelings), although some do
- Are extremely anxious outside their 'safe' environment, although this is often well concealed; in school they're likely to be feeling anxious most of the time
- May move stiffly or awkwardly when anxious, or if they think they are being watched
- Find it extremely difficult to answer the register, say hello, goodbye or thank you
- Find it difficult to make what appear to be simple choices (for example, 'pick a colour', 'choose a partner', 'find a space') fearing that they don't know the 'correct' response
- Can be very slow to respond to a question
- Can be very sensitive to noise, touch or crowds
- May have other phobias (for example, eating in front of others or using the school toilet)

Many children with selective mutism may also meet the diagnostic criteria for various social anxiety disorders.<sup>48</sup> There may be a history of shyness, anxiety, speech and language disorders or psychiatric disorders in the family of a child with selective mutism.<sup>49</sup>

It's important to recognise the underlying anxiety that is the likely origin of selective mutism and to dismiss any ideas that it's deliberate, wilful or controlling behaviour by the child. Understanding this will relieve the stress felt by adults working with the child.

The most common place for children to exhibit mute behaviour is in the classroom, so teachers or nursery staff often notice the disorder first.

Generally children with selective mutism are very wary of any situation that demands verbal responses, especially checks. Their anxiety may well increase to a level that makes it impossible for them to respond at all. It's likely that they will have to be excluded from the check. Some children will be amenable to a non-verbal assessment technique, such as pointing to letters, but others may not even be at the stage of communicating non-verbally. Adults should understand that persuasion, flattery, bribery, pressuring or punishing children with selective mutism will only increase their anxiety.

## Helping to access the phonics screening check

Be advised by the parents, speech and language therapist or other involved professionals, because even attempting the check may be too stressful and set back any progress towards speaking made by the child.

Possible issues	Ways to help
The child may worry they will be interrupted or overheard	Undertake the check in a quiet space
Most children with selective mutism have adequate comprehension and reception skills in the classroom, but are unlikely to speak to name alphabet letters, produce phonics sounds, or read text	Some children will allow their parents to videotape or audiotape their reading performance at home, which can then be reviewed by school staff
If the child is not speaking at school, it may be possible to look at alternative ways to access the check	Administer the check at home in the presence of the parent (with or without the use of video or audiotape)  The speech and language therapist or another professional, with whom the child is able to speak comfortably, could administer the check outside of school

<sup>48</sup> Black and Uhde, 1995; Dummit et al, 1997

<sup>49</sup> Steinhausen and Adamek, 1997

## The outcome of the check

Some children may feel able to undertake the check with a familiar adult, for example their speech and language therapist, outside of school. Their responses may accurately reflect their phonic skills.

Some children with selective mutism, who have reached the stage of speaking in a whisper, may respond to a familiar person in a situation where they will not be overheard. If they're only whispering, all the speech sounds they produce will sound voiceless (for example, 'b' produced as 'p', 'd' as 't' and 'z' as 's').

## Responding to the outcome of the check

Approaches to support the literacy development of children with selective mutism:

The mutism is highly functional in that it reduces anxiety and protects the child from the perceived challenge of social interaction. Treatment of selective mutism should focus on reduction of the general anxiety, rather than simply focusing only on the mute behaviours.

All literacy work should be set within general good practice for children with selective mutism – please see the section on additional resources and further support on the next page.

- Use non-verbal activities for recognition of phonemes with signs or actions (for example, Jolly Phonics), word picture matching and word sorting

## An evidence resource to inform next steps

Most children with selective mutism have adequate language skills to learn to read and will not require special education provision, but some adaptations and staff awareness training will be necessary; selective mutism is unlikely to resolve spontaneously. Early identification and intervention are essential, as the longer selective mutism is left the more difficult it is to resolve. Outcomes are generally successful if selective mutism is identified and treated as early as possible.<sup>50</sup>

## Additional resources and further support

### Publications and Resources:

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens (2001) Published by Speechmark

Can I tell you about Selective Mutism? A guide for friends family and professionals by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens (2012) Published by Jessica Kingsley

Silent Children: Approaches to Selective Mutism (video/DVD and book) Rosemary Sage and Alice Sluckin, eds. (2004) Published by SMIRA and University of Leicester

SMIRA Information Pack for Resource Centres and Information Pack for Parents, available from:  
[www.smira.org.uk/publications/23-smira-publications.html](http://www.smira.org.uk/publications/23-smira-publications.html)

Helping your child with Selective Mutism: Practical steps to overcome a fear of speaking by Angela, E., McHolm, Ph.D., Charles, E., Cunningham, Ph.D., Melanie, K., Vanier, M.A., (2005) New Harbinger Publications Inc.

Helping Children with Selective Mutism and their Parents: A Guide for School-Based Professionals by Christopher Kearney, Ph.D (2010) Published by Oxford University Press

Understanding the World of Selective Mutism (CD-ROM), by the Selective Mutism Group Childhood Anxiety Network: Erin Benzie and Susan Benzie, Sherry Heckman, Julie Nicodemus

Jolly Phonics

<http://jollylearning.co.uk/overview-about-jolly-phonics>

Teachers' CPD Course, Supporting Pupils with Selective Mutism  
[www.lighthouse.tv](http://www.lighthouse.tv)

### Organisations and websites:

Selective Mutism Information and Research Association -  
[www.simra.org.uk](http://www.simra.org.uk)

Selective Mutism Group-Childhood Anxiety Network -  
[www.selectivemutism.org](http://www.selectivemutism.org)

<sup>50</sup> Johnson and Wintgens, 2001

## Case Study

Priya was a shy and 'clingy' toddler, she didn't speak at nursery, although she did at home. By the time she reached three years of age, her mother was concerned about her speech and decided to seek professional advice.

After some research, her mother contacted SMIRA and the family attended their annual conference, meeting parents of children with similar issues and were able to speak to professionals with an understanding of selective mutism.

After a time of settling in at school Priya was still not speaking there. She was seen for assessment by an Educational Psychologist and her mother and teacher attended a training course on selective mutism.

### What helps Priya

The school followed guidance on no one putting pressure on Priya to speak and a specific 'sliding-in' programme was set up using the 'Selective Mutism Resource Manual'.

This structured programme, very gradually introduced the teacher into short activities where Priya was talking with her mother in a quiet room in school – from sitting outside with the door closed, to moving nearer to Priya and her mum. These 'sliding in' sessions continued through reception.

After a while Priya was happy to give one or two word answers to her teacher. She also started to speak to each of her friends one by one. At the beginning of Year 1 Priya was able to answer the register. 'Sliding-in' was then discontinued and Priya was allowed to progress on her own. Her confidence has grown and she now speaks spontaneously and freely to children and adults. She has taken on a speaking role in her school nativity play and has sung a solo with a drama group. This improved confidence in talking at school has enabled Priya to join in and make good use of phonics teaching.