

How can parents help schools?

It is essential that school and home communicate effectively to support the child. Absence from school should be avoided as this usually makes returning to school more difficult. All children experience upsets in school from time to time and this may be impossible for the selective mutism child to communicate in school. Helping the child to develop resilience to overcome these is important. Equally, sharing the child's anxieties and concerns with staff can help the school better manage their needs.

Who can make a diagnosis?

Selective mutism is often self-evident but it can be important to ensure that other causes are ruled out. Usually a speech and language therapist, educational psychologist or paediatrician can confirm diagnosis once symptoms have been present for at least a month.

FIVE-MINUTE GUIDES

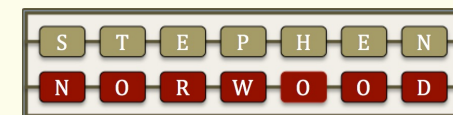
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happylearners.info

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A Five-Minute Guide to Selective Mutism



What is selective mutism?

Selective mutism is an inability to talk in certain social situations. The individual will usually be able to talk naturally and easily when in familiar and safe environments like their own home with close family members. It is classified as an anxiety disorder.

What are the causes of selective mutism?

No specific cause has been identified. An increased risk of developing selective mutism is associated with any of the following factors:

- Social anxiety
- Emotional difficulties
- Attachment difficulties
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- Speech production difficulties e.g. stammering
- Language difficulties
- English as additional language or time spent abroad exposed to other languages when young
- Other family members with selective mutism or social anxiety

How does selective mutism affect learning?

This can depend on the underlying causes of the selective mutism and its severity. Some children are able to absorb learning from immersion in the classroom environment where they may listen attentively and complete written work. However, the mutism can make assessment of their understanding difficult and restrict their opportunities in paired and group activities. For some children, all forms of communication are difficult and they will not write or use gestures to communicate. This can make learning difficult and add to any feelings of stress that they are experiencing in school.

How common is selective mutism?

Selective mutism is quite rare affecting less than 1% of children. It is more prevalent in girls than boys.

How does selective mutism vary in children?

About 90% of selective mute children are mute in school and with unfamiliar adults. About 25% are mute with children other than family members. Mutism at home with family members is rare.

What other characteristics are common?

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder and it is therefore very likely that the child will exhibit other symptoms of anxiety. They may include:

- Timidness and shyness (temperamental inhibition)
- Social anxiety – uncomfortable with new people; afraid of being teased and criticised; avoiding attention, afraid of making mistakes
- Separation anxiety
- Inflexibility, assertiveness and stubbornness at home. May experience mood swings
- Often complains of being unwell
- Poor eye contact
- Lack of expression in body language
- Self-harming behaviours such as skin picking and hair pulling.

How can schools support these children?

It is essential that staff understand the child's selective mutism and are sympathetic of their communication difficulties. It is important that these children are not forced to talk and that verbal and non-verbal communication is developed gradually and sensitively in response to the child's growing confidence.