

## **Helping primary school aged children with selective mutism:**

### **Information for parents/carers and teachers**

#### **What is selective mutism?**

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder that prevents children speaking in certain social situations, such as at school or with relatives they don't see very often. Children with selective mutism are able to speak freely in other situations, such as with close family and friends when nobody else is listening. Parents often say their child behaves "like two different children", depending on who is around them.

Selective mutism is caused by anxiety. It is not a choice or an act of defiance, it is a freeze response triggered by certain situations. This response creates feelings of anxiety and causes the child to be physically unable to speak. In time, children learn to anticipate situations that trigger their freeze response and will do their best to avoid them.

When their selective mutism is triggered, some children are still able to communicate a bit, for example they may use gestures or give short answers to questions but are unable to talk freely. Other children are unable to communicate in any way when their selective mutism is triggered – they aren't able to use facial expressions, gesture, talk, or write.

Selective mutism usually starts between the ages of 2 and 4 years old and it affects about 1 in 140 primary school aged children. It is more common in girls, and in children whose home language is different to their school language.

#### **What causes selective mutism?**

Selective mutism can be thought of as a phobia of talking to certain people. The cause isn't always clear, but it's known to be linked to anxiety. Some children may find talking stressful due to a speech or language disorder or a hearing loss. Some children may find busy or noisy situations overwhelming, and that anxiety can transfer to talking.

Selective mutism is not usually caused by trauma. When mutism is caused by trauma (reactive or traumatic mutism) a child suddenly stops speaking in environments where they previously had no difficulty talking. Selective mutism is not part of autism, though some autistic children also have selective mutism.

## Are they just shy?

Selective mutism is not the same as shyness. Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder that affects communication; shyness is a personality trait. Children with selective mutism may be shy, or they may have a confident and outgoing personality in situations where they feel comfortable.

## What can parents/carers and teachers do to help in situations where the child is experiencing selective mutism?

- ✓ **Let the child know that you understand they want to speak but find it difficult sometimes.** Reassure them that they will be able to talk when they're ready.
- ✓ **Create an atmosphere that is relaxed and friendly around the child.** Give the child time to warm up in new situations and focus on fun activities rather than getting them to talk. Ask other adults and older children to do the same. Consider ways to make a situation more comfortable for the child, for example seating them next to a friend they can talk to.
- ✓ **Have fun together.** Use activities that you can focus on with the child (rather than your attention being on the child). Playdough, Lego, and crafts are great choices. Sit beside rather than opposite the child, limit your eye contact and don't make an issue of them giving you eye contact. Smile and let the child know that you enjoy being with them and you are interested in them, whether or not they talk.
- ✓ **Use commentary style talking.** Make chatty comments about what the child is doing. You could say things like "you're rolling the playdough out really thin" or think aloud rather than asking direct questions, for example "I wonder which cutter you would like..."
- ✓ **Respond positively to all efforts the child makes to join in and interact with others,** such as passing or sharing toys, nodding, pointing. If a child communicates through their behaviour or uses a gesture, respond as if they have spoken to you. For example, if the child points to a Lego piece you could say "you want that red piece, here you go".
- ✓ **Create opportunities for the child to communicate,** without any pressure/expectation to talk. You could say "I can't find a round piece anywhere!" and then wait. Give the child enough time to respond - you can count to ten in your head to help you wait. Continue the conversation, even if the child does not respond with words, for example "You've found a round piece, well done!"
- ✓ **When the child does talk, don't make a fuss.** Respond warmly as though it is what you were expecting them to do and avoid giving praise for talking.

## What doesn't help children with selective mutism?

- X **Pressure to talk.** Although it is usually done with the best intentions, putting pressure on a child to talk is unlikely to be successful. A child with selective mutism is *less* likely to talk if you ask them lots of questions or tell them to talk. Avoid asking them to “say please”, “tell me which one you want”, or trying to bribe them to talk.
- X **Asking direct questions.** This puts the child on the spot, especially if other people are watching and waiting for an answer.
- X **Treating the child with selective mutism differently.** Children with selective mutism often don’t like to be singled out. It can help if the whole class do things the same way, for example everyone uses a self check-in for the register.
- X **Talking about the child’s selective mutism or your worries in front of them.** Try to hold meetings and phone calls in private where the child can’t hear you discussing their difficulties.

### **Helpful online resources**

NHS webpage on selective mutism: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/selective-mutism](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/selective-mutism)

Talk With Me selective mutism factsheet for parents of under 5s available in English and Welsh from <https://www.gov.wales/talk-with-me>

Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA) website <http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk> and Facebook group.

Videos on the [@Confident Children](#) YouTube channel, particularly [10 Facts about Selective Mutism](#) and [The Do's and Don'ts When Interacting with a Child with Selective Mutism](#)

### **Recommended books**

*Can I tell you about Selective Mutism? A guide for friends, family, and professionals* by Maggie Johnson & Alison Wintgens, 2012

*Understanding Selective Mutism, A Beginner’s Guide* by Lucy Nathanson, 2017

*My name is Eliza and I don’t talk at school. A storybook for children and a guidebook for parents and professionals* by Lucy Nathanson, 2018

**This document is available in Welsh/  
Mae’r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg**