

Selective mutism

What is selective mutism?

Selective mutism is a term used when children who are able to talk quite freely in some situations, usually with their families at home, and are persistently silent in other situations, usually outside the home and with less familiar people. The problem commonly shows up in school where children who have not spoken for two terms or more can usefully be described as having selective mutism.

This is not normal shyness nor obstinacy; it is a psychological problem when children seem to freeze and become unable to speak, a sort of fearfulness and social anxiety, together with an excessive sensitivity to the reactions of others.

'Selective mutism' is a more recent term for 'elective mutism'; both terms can be used, but 'selective mutism' is now favoured by most professionals.

A few facts

- Selective mutism is a relatively rare condition. The best estimate suggests that less than one child per thousand is affected.
- Selective mutism is usually reported between the ages of three and five.
- Girls are affected slightly more frequently than boys.
- Children who come from a bilingual background are slightly more likely to display selective mutism.
- Children with selective mutism are more likely to have other speech and language difficulties than other children.
- The majority of children with selective mutism are of average or above average intelligence, but some show moderate to severe learning difficulties.

What can be done to help?

In most situations referral to both a speech and language therapist and a psychologist is recommended.

Then a full assessment of the child can be carried out over a period of time, including assessment of intelligence and all areas associated with the mutism. Assessment of the child's verbal comprehension (understanding of language) is usually possible, and their expressive language and speech (what they say) can be indirectly assessed using home tapes or the like.

Treatment may involve a graduated programme carried out by a therapist or key worker in school to tackle the mutism – several specific programmes have recently emerged. Parent-child work may help, and support and advice to both school and parents are needed.

The condition is complex and progress is slow. Excessive sensitivity is a personality characteristic, and although the children can make significant progress over the years they are likely to remain somewhat reticent.

References

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- Hultquist, A M** (1995), *Selective mutism: Causes and interventions*. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 3(2), 100–107
- Johnson, M & Glassberg, A** (1993) *Breaking down the barriers created by selective mute children*, available from Speech and Language Therapy Department, Kent and Canterbury Hospital, Ethelbert Road, Canterbury, Kent CT1 3NG
- Johnson, M & Wintgens, A** (2001), *The selective mutism resource manual*. Bicester: Speechmark Publishing

Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.

Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Expressive language difficulties (15)

Other organisations which can help

SMIRA (Selective Mutism Information and Research Association)

www.smira.org.uk
info@smira.org.uk
5 Keyham Close
Leicester
LE5 1FW

Tel: 0800 2289765

The psychological service of your local council. Details appear in the business section of the telephone directory, under the council's name and 'Education'.

The speech and language therapy service of your local health board or trust. Details appear in the business section of the telephone directory, under 'Health' and the name of the board or trust.

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