



BILINGUAL AND SELECTIVELY MUTE

By: Dr. Elisa Shipon-Blum

President and Director: Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center

CEO & Executive/Medical Director: Selective Mutism Group~Childhood Anxiety Network

Most bilingual children who develop SM are innately temperamentally inhibited. They may develop SM as a result of their social cautiousness and timidity in an attempt to protect themselves from the anxious and fearful feelings that emerge when in the 'less familiar' language environment.

Consider this scenario:

A Spanish-speaking boy spoke only Spanish at home for the first four years of his life but had limited exposure to English. Upon entering school, he sees other children performing and speaking quite easily in English. Because he is not nearly as secure with the English language, he becomes anxious and fearful that he will say the words wrong and bring attention to his mistakes. Over time, his anxiety about possibly speaking incorrectly becomes so severe that mutism develops as a means of avoiding the feelings of anxiety and fear.

This is not to say that all or even most children who speak one language in the home and other in school are at risk of developing SM. However, children who are already temperamentally inhibited may.

I am often asked the following question:

If my child's insecurity is primarily with the 'less familiar' language that is spoken outside our home, why is it that when we are with relatives who speak our native language my child is still mute?

The 'speaking' anxiety that has developed can transfer to the native language rather easily. In fact, I see this scenario most of the time. In addition, it is also quite common that when traveling to your native country your child will remain completely mute! This can be quite confusing for everyone involved and definitely makes *understanding* how to treat the bilingual SM child that much more difficult.

A child who is mute in social situations in both languages is a more challenging case to treat compared to the bilingual child who is selectively mute in only the newer, less secure language. Children with SM probably start out only mute in the newer language. As time goes on, their mutism may transfer to the native language as their speaking anxiety intensifies. This is why early diagnosis and treatment is so crucial!

Ways to Help the Bilingual Child with SM

Many of the tactics described below are used to help any child who has SM. However, I have modified the approach for the bilingual child.

School

Go to the school with your child before or after school when few people are there. Allow your child to speak to you or anyone else s/he might wish to talk to in the language s/he is most comfortable with. Initially, what is important is helping your child see him or herself as a “speaker” in school.

Once the child is speaking to you in your native language within the school environment, encourage English. If your child is reluctant, offer some positive reinforcement, such as stickers or tokens. Since your child is already speaking to you in the school, the reluctance is due to insecurity, continue speaking English as much as possible at home and other places (stores, malls, etc).

If your child is still very reluctant to speak English...negotiate! You might suggest that two days a week you will speak English together in the school and the other three days you will speak your native language. This tactic has the benefit of giving the child some **control** in establishing treatment goals.

Let Your Child be the Teacher

It has been said that there is no better way to learn something than to teach it! Encourage your child to teach you better English Skills. Get workbooks, tapes, games, etc.

In school, spend time alone with the teacher. The point here is to build comfort with the teacher without the any additional social pressures. Since the SM child feels confident with their native language, spending alone time with the teacher, where the SM child begins to TEACH the teacher the new language is a very successful tactic that has worked with many bilingual children.

On play dates, encourage your child to teach the other child simple words (colors, numbers, songs, etc.) in your native language. It would be helpful if this child could be a child the teacher is pairing your child with for activities in the classroom. Since your child is confident and secure with his/her native language, teaching other children and feeling in control is often very effective.

Another Play Date Strategy

Engage the children in play (bake, play board games, whatever your child enjoys). Perhaps start out with your child's native language, then introduce English games during another play date. If your child's friend is not comfortable with your native language, use English games, but allow your child to speak or whisper in the language s/he is most comfortable with.

Most bilingual children are comfortable with their native language. Encouraging speech in that language FIRST is an excellent place to start. Once verbalization is occurring in their native language, switching to English can be introduced with various tools and tactics.

For more information visit: www.selectivemutism.org ~ www.selectivemutismcenter.org
or E-mail: SMinfo@selectivemutism.org

Dr E Shipon-Blum.© page concept, design and content are not to be reproduced unless for personal use. Users are responsible for complying with all copyright and licensing restrictions associated with this information.