

Do you know a child who never talks, talks to a select few, or only whispers?

What is Selective Mutism?

A child who never talks, talks to a select few, or only whispers may be suffering from an anxiety disorder called Selective Mutism (SM). A child with SM literally cannot talk in certain settings. The majority of children with SM also have social phobia, which begins to explain their difficulty interacting in social situations.

Children with SM often have difficulty smiling in social situations, looking others in the eye, and may look away when confronted or spoken to. These outward symptoms of SM may be mistaken as being stubborn, being disrespectful, being willful, trying to get attention, or trying to control a situation. This is certainly not the case as children with SM become so anxious, they simply cannot speak.

Diagnostic Criteria

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM)-IV, published by the American Psychiatric Association, outlines the following criteria for diagnosing SM.

1. Child does not speak in certain places such as school.
2. But, can speak normally in other settings where he/she is comfortable and relaxed (often at home).
3. Child's inability to speak interferes with ability to function in educational and/or social settings.
4. Mutism has persisted for at least one month.
5. Mutism is not part of a communication disorder such as stuttering, and is not due to other conditions such as autistic spectrum disorders.

Social Phobia

According to studies, approximately 90% of children with SM suffer from social phobia. Social phobia is a persistent fear of social or performance situations. Many of these children feel like they are "on stage" every minute of the day! This is evident by their uncomfortable body language when any attention is brought to them.

There is Help

The Selective Mutism Group-Childhood Anxiety Network (SMG~CAN) is a group of people dedicated to the research of SM and offers support and information to parents and others who work with children with SM. If you think you know a child who may have SM, please contact the SMG-CAN for more information. Visit www.selectivemutism.org.

The SMG~CAN is a division of the nonprofit, 501(c) 3 organization, the Childhood Anxiety Network www.childhoodanxietynetwork.org.