



Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center

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UNDERSTANDING SELECTIVE MUTISM AS A COMMUNICATION ANXIETY DISORDER

The name, SELECTIVE MUTISM, implies that the main and only issue with 'silent' children is their 'inability to speak.' As a result, so many focus treatment and understanding on 'ways to get the child to speak.'

Unfortunately, this method is inappropriate and only causes more anxiety and frustration for the child.

When one starts to decipher the characteristics of the SM child and determines their ability to communicate it will become clear that many of our children are unable to communicate nonverbally as well as verbally when anxious.

Therefore, in order to truly help the anxious SM child who may stand motionless with fear, one must determine the degree of '*communication anxiety*' that the child demonstrates in various social situations.

With this understanding, referring to the following SM-STAGES of COMMUNICATION COMFORT SCALE © is KEY in working with the SM child and understanding the stages of communication that SM children often struggle with.

The SM-SCCS © illustrates that communication is broken down into RESPONDING and INITIATING and the three different stages of communication.

Stage 0- Noncommunicative; Stage 1- Nonverbal responding (1a) & Nonverbal initiating (1b);
Stage 2- Verbal responding (2a) & Verbal initiating (2b)

SM children demonstrate DIFFERENT levels of anxiety and are therefore in DIFFERENT stages of *communication comfort* with different people within different settings.

Examples are:

- The SM child who speaks normally (responds and initiates) with their friend at home or out of school (Stage 2) but can only communicate nonverbally (nodding, pointing) in response to her friends in school (Stage 1a)
- The SM child who can respond to his friends via 'quiet talking' to friends in class (Stage 2a) but is mute, frozen-looking/expressionless & cannot even respond when their teacher asks a question (Stage 0)
- The SM child who is mute in school, initiates & responds to peers (stage 1a), responds to teacher (unable to initiate) (stage 1b) when in school, but chatters up a

storm during playdates (stage 2)

What is often confusing to many is the SM child's ability to SPEAK in one setting, but their inability to speak in another setting. To an outsider, and to someone who does not understand the selectively mute child, this can be interpreted as defiance on the child's part and interpreted as the child's "REFUSAL" to speak.

In reality, the child's anxiety level changes from one scenario to the next. Their ability to communicate comfortably determines their ability or lack of ability to function appropriately. In other words, a child who's communication inability interferes with his or her ability to function socially, academically or impinges on their emotional well being has a dysfunctional or maladaptive way of communicating. This child needs professional help to overcome this communication anxiety. He/she is not being oppositional or 'difficult' but truly has a disability that enables for appropriate social interaction and communication.

An example is the child who can talk to his friends, but cannot answer the teacher when questioned. Many educators get frustrated and upset and consider the SM child as oppositional and defiant. Understanding that the child's communication anxiety rises dramatically when the teacher asks a question is KEY to being able to help the child overcome his or her fears. What is happening in this scenario is that the child is in STAGE 2 of communication with their peers, but in STAGE 1 with their teacher. Working to help gradually progress the child from stage 1 → stage 2 is the goal of treatment in this case. GOALS centering on responding nonverbally and initiating nonverbally are the first goals to tackle. Eventually, verbalization is introduced in a purposeful manner using the child's comfort as a guide.

In order to progress from Nonverbal to Verbal communication, many children need a way to transfer speaking into a particular environment. Transferring of speaking sometimes occurs via a verbal intermediary; person whom child speaks to or object (stuffed animal, finger puppet, 'fist') that can help transfer verbalization into setting or to another person. I.e, child will begin whispering to verbal intermediary, i.e mom when someone says hello or asks a questions. As time goes on, distance between SM child will increase distance of whisper from verbal intermediary. This is all based on child comfort level and ability to perform this technique.

When one starts to VIEW Selective Mutism from a communication anxiety standpoint, it becomes clear that expecting a silent, 'frozen-looking,' noninteractive child to speak is only causing MORE anxiety for the child. Small, purposeful steps need to be taken (under the guidance of a competent treating professional) to help your child progress from one stage to the next.

Therefore, using the SM - Communication Comfort Scale © as a GUIDE to determining the SM child's communication anxiety is CRITICAL in the assessment, evaluation and treatment process.

SM-STAGES OF COMMUNICATION COMFORT SCALE (SM-SCCS) ©

NON-COMMUNICATIVE (neither nonverbal nor verbal)

STAGE 0:

- NO Responding, NO initiating
child stands motionless, expressionless, Frozen-looking

COMMUNICATIVE (verbal and/or nonverbal)

STAGE 1:

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:

- 1A **Responding** (via pointing, nodding, writing, using sign language etc)
- 1B **Initiating** (via getting someone's attention via pointing, raising ones hand, etc.)

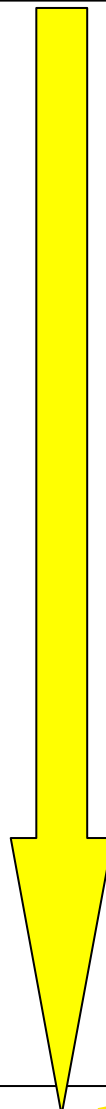
Need Verbal Intermediary
to go from Stage 1 → 2

STAGE 2:

VERBAL COMMUNICATION:

- 2A **Responding** ('any sounds' i.e., grunts, baby talk, animal sounds, moans, soft whispering, speaking)
- 2B **Initiating** (via getting someone's attention via making any sound)

MUTISM



SPEAKING

** Verbal intermediary helps to transfer speaking into environment. Person or object.

** Ability to respond/initiate determined by 'comfort' in setting. Communication varies from setting to setting