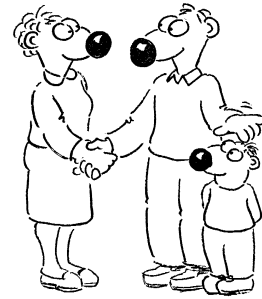


Understanding Selective Mutism: Tips for Parents and Educators

(Written by Charles E. Cunningham, Ph.D.)



What is Selective Mutism?

Most children with selective mutism do not speak to teachers, other students, principals, or secretaries. Children with selective mutism may also have difficulty speaking to neighbours, distant relatives, or unfamiliar adults. In contrast, children with selective mutism typically speak comfortably at home to parents, siblings, and in some cases, neighbourhood friends.

When Does Selective Mutism Start?

Selective mutism typically starts at the beginning of Kindergarten, Junior Kindergarten, or in some cases, preschool.

How Long Does Selective Mutism Persist?

Some children who are shy and hesitant to speak at the start of school, speak comfortably by the end of the year. Persistent selective mutism is less common. Indeed, most teachers have not had a child with selective mutism in their classrooms. In the absence of effective intervention, selective mutism may persist through primary, middle, and in some cases, the secondary school years.

What Causes Selective Mutism?

Selective mutism often reflects **a fear of being heard or seen speaking at school**. When requested to speak, children with selective mutism often look down, blush, and show other signs of intense anxiety. Selective mutism might be considered a **phobia regarding speaking** at school.

Many children with selective mutism are **shy** and slow to warm up. Parents often report a family history of similar temperamental characteristics. The very shy, slow to warm up child who copes with anxiety in new situations by remaining silent may panic when asked to speak. This anxiety becomes associated with the classroom, teacher, students, and school in general.

Do Children with Selective Mutism have Other Fears?

Children with selective mutism may be anxious about joining in classroom activities which might require speaking, asking to go the washroom, or participating in gym. Children with selective mutism may be hesitant to attend school.

How Do Other Children Respond to Students with Selective Mutism?

Children with selective mutism typically develop friendships with several peers/classmates. Children seem comfortable interacting nonverbally with the selectively mute child. Peers may speak for the selectively mute child or inform adults that the child does not talk. Other children seldom tease or bully selectively mute children.

How Do Children with Selective Mutism Progress Academically?

Children with selective mutism typically acquire reading, math, and written language skills at a rate that is consistent with their abilities. While selective mutism makes it difficult to assess the child's language and oral reading skills, it may not interfere with academic development.

How Should Teachers Respond?

If a child is not talking at school, seek consultation from a knowledgeable professional. Interventions that begin quickly are most successful.

Pressure, punitive consequences, or offers of rewards for speaking can be a source of tremendous anxiety and may compound the problem. Efforts to catch the child off guard are typically unsuccessful and may make children more vigilant.

Can Children Overcome Selective Mutism?

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Overcoming persistent selective mutism may require several years of patient work. With assistance, however, children with selective mutism can gradually overcome their fear of speaking at school.