

*The following article was written by a parent in an attempt to increase understanding of her daughter's condition:*

## What does Selective Mutism mean?

If someone uses a hearing aid, you *know* they have trouble hearing you. If someone else uses a wheelchair, you *know* they have difficulty in walking. A person who stammers can have problems in saying what he or she really wants. These people have disabilities – selective mutism is a type of disability too, but it is one which can be very hard for other people to understand.

However, many of us can think of something which frightens us or makes us feel extremely uncomfortable. We might not always like to admit it – maybe other people would laugh at us, or say that we were being silly, but to *us*, that fear is very real. We might be terrified of spiders and be unable to go in a room where we knew one was. Some people are scared of heights, of flying, of confined spaces, of water, of dogs, or even cats. They may go to great lengths to avoid getting themselves into situations where they might have to confront the thing which frightens them. We call these fears *phobias*.

Try to imagine yourself in the sort of situation which might make *you* feel anxious. What happens? Your heart-rate can increase, you may sweat, get breathless, feel sick, perhaps blush – perhaps your lips or hands or legs start to quiver or shake? Your brain has received signals of potential danger and has begun to set off a series of reactions that will help you to protect yourself.

A person who suffers from selective mutism has a phobia too. They *can* speak normally and they *want* to speak but they often *fail* to speak. They behave in a *completely* normal way when they are in an environment in which they feel relaxed and comfortable. In their own home, for instance, they are quite likely to be very talkative, loud, funny and even bossy.

In most other settings, however, *including school* – they will feel real fear, just as if they are permanently “on stage”. This feeling will be made worse by the knowledge that someone will be expecting them to speak. The words just won't come out, or else they will come out in a whisper. It may seem like shyness, but it is very different, and the affected person is not necessarily shy. People who have been able to look back and describe their feelings at these times, have talked about their throats feeling tight or paralysed.

It is not so surprising then, that sufferers will try to protect themselves from these unpleasant feelings. They may try to communicate in other ways, with nods or shakes of the head, for example. They are very sensitive to how others see them and are easily hurt. They are afraid of seeming different, or

being mocked, or criticised or rejected, and more than anything, they do not want anyone to *know* they are afraid.

What happens then, is that they start to avoid activities which they would genuinely like to take part in. They know that speaking leads to acceptance and to making friends, but speaking, and especially starting a conversation, is incredibly difficult for them. They avoid speaking by withdrawing from people and isolating themselves. This means that they do not really learn how to socialise with other people. They become very lonely, even though they are not loners. They may protect themselves by pretending, and even believing, that they did not want these things in the first place.

### **Some facts:**

Selective mutism was once thought to be very rare, but the incidence is said to be almost identical to the rate of narrowly defined autism.

It is more common in girls than in boys.

No single cause has been established, though emotional, psychological and social factors may influence its development.

### **Children with selective mutism are likely to...**

- **Find it difficult to look at you when they are anxious** – they may turn their heads away and *seem* to ignore you. *You* might think that they are being unfriendly, but they are not – they just do not know how to respond.
- **Not smile, or look blank or expressionless** when anxious – in school, they will be feeling anxious most of the time and this is why it is hard for them to smile, laugh or show their true feelings, even when they have a wicked sense of humour.
- **Move stiffly or awkwardly** when anxious, or if they think that they are being watched.
- **Find it incredibly difficult to answer the register, or to say hello, goodbye or thank-you** – this can seem rude or hurtful, but it is not intentional.
- **Be slow to respond – in any way – to a question.**
- **Worry more than other people**
- **Be very sensitive** to noise or touch or crowds.
- **Be intelligent, perceptive and inquisitive**
- **Be very sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others**
- **Find it difficult to express their own feelings**
- **Have good powers of concentration.**

### **References:**

Robert Goodman & Stephen Scott. Child Psychiatry, Blackwell Science 1997.

Maggie Johnson & Alison Wintgens (2001) Speechmark Publishing Ltd. Telford Road, Bicester Oxon. OX26 4LQ.

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