

Ask the Developmental Doc-August 2010

“What to consider as your child with Selective Mutism Transitions Back to School”

Dear Developmental Doc,

My daughter is 5 years old and I think she has something called Selective Mutism. She is incredibly verbal at home but has always been shy around strangers. This summer her camp counselor expressed some concern that although my daughter was friendly, she never once spoke to anyone at camp. I specifically chose a camp experience at the site of her new school, hoping that this would help her feel more comfortable in the Fall. School starts in less than 2 weeks. I am now really worried that she will not be able to make a comfortable transition into kindergarten. Do you have any thoughts and/or suggestions to help smooth the way for her new academic year? Lourdes, South Pasadena, CA.

Dear Lourdes,

Selective Mutism is a psychiatric disorder that affects 7 out of every 1,000 children (making it almost as common as autism) yet; it is seldom dealt with within the confines of a psychotherapist's office. It is an extreme form of social anxiety disorder where a child cannot speak in select settings, most typically at school, even though they can (usually) speak normally at home. There is little understanding and subsequently little empathy for these children who often are frozen with fear as they try to confront specific social settings. It is important to understand that although environmental stresses play an important role in anxiety and other mood disorders, most children with Selective Mutism have a hereditary predisposition to anxiety disorders. Fifteen years ago, these children were known as elective mutes, and their silence was seen as willful and manipulative. Children suffering from Selective Mutism are not choosing to be silent nor refusing to speak, nor are they being oppositional. They are literally so anxious they have developed dysfunctional coping skills to combat anxiety that most often includes avoiding social interactions.

As a consequence of these dysfunctional coping skills, children with Selective Mutism are often misdiagnosed with a variety of disorders that range from the child being 'just shy' to autistic to oppositional and defiant to selectively mute. My first suggestion is to have your child properly assessed by a developmental specialist who is well versed in recognizing Selective Mutism, to ascertain whether or not your daughter is indeed suffering from this disorder. Once diagnosed, there are a variety of strategies that can be incorporated to assure a safe and secure entrance into the new academic year.

- 1) Contact the principal of your daughter's school and have this administrator arrange for your child to both meet her teacher a couple of days before school begins and to have an opportunity to orient herself to her new classroom.
- 2) Have your daughter make a picture or bring a sticker to this first meeting so that the teacher can incorporate the artwork into her classroom set up and then subsequently on the first day of school, acknowledge your daughter's contribution, thus from the very beginning of the semester, elevating her status to her peers.
- 3) Have the child sit close to the teacher to assure full comprehension of the lesson plan and if talking is difficult, allow your daughter to be the 'teacher's helper' by assisting him/her to pick out a peer to be called on. Again, this provides another strategy for your child to hold a significant place in her personal community.
- 4) Find out who your daughter likes to play with at school and encourage play dates up to three times a week to help her learn, through the natural system of play, how to navigate socially. These skills learned in the relatively stress free home environment are typically generalized back into the classroom.
- 5) If you feel that these issues need to be addressed more formally, then you can go to your child's school and ask to have your child assessed through an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These assessments are typically done through your local public school and may include a psychological, speech and health examination. If services (for example a social skills group in school) are determined to be warranted, the services will only be delivered if your child is receiving her education through the public school system.

School transitions are traditionally a tough hurdle for most children. I appreciate your mindful approach not only to your daughter's worries but also your desire to prepare a warm, inviting environment for her to succeed in and blossom. Esther B. Hess, Ph.D. a.k.a. The Developmental Doc.