



## Classroom Strategies for Teachers of Selectively Mute Children

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[www.selectivemutism.com](http://www.selectivemutism.com)

SM children **cannot** talk as the result of the physical symptoms caused by the extreme anxiety they feel. They are **not** being defiant, stubborn, or disobedient.

Do not feel it is your job to make this child speak. It is your job to lessen the **anxiety** in all classroom activities for this child. Focus on reducing anxiety and not on producing speech. Forget the words, "yes, no, please, thank you, etc."

Seat the child to the side in the classroom, not front and center where everyone is looking at him.

Avoid eye contact at first.

Let the child know that you will help him, but will not try to force him to talk.

Talk to the child about ways he can communicate with you, for example, nodding his head yes and no, keeping cards on his desk to answer yes and no, using a pass to go to the restroom. Assure him that you are not going to try to make him talk, but need to find ways to communicate. Let him know that if he ever feels comfortable enough to talk, that would be ok too.

Find an outgoing child to be his buddy. There may be a child to whom he already whispers. Seat the child next to his buddy. Encourage the child's parents to arrange play dates at home or after school in the classroom so that the child can develop a comfort level with other children.

Talk to the class **when he isn't there** about his "shyness" and how to respond to him:

For example:

- Be his friend and include him in all activities.
- Don't try to make him talk.
- Don't say to people, "He doesn't talk."
- Do not yell out or overly respond if the child should speak. Act as if it were

normal and continue with your activity.

There are several good books to initiate this discussion such as *Shy Charles*, by Rosemary Wells, *Shy Guy*, by Giles Tibo, or *Understanding Katie*, by Dr. Elisa Shipon Blum.

Go to the child's home for a visit. Do not expect speech. Just let the child interact with you in any way that he can. He could show you his computer, books, fish, etc.

Let the child come in before or after school to help you in the classroom. Let the child's parent be there if he is more comfortable.

Do cooperative group activities (small groups) so that he feels more relaxed. He could be the recorder for a cooperative group.

Allow nonverbal communication in the school setting, especially in the early months of the beginning of school. The student and you will discover a time that more verbal communication can be encouraged. This may take some time and may never occur, but don't let the nonverbal communication become too much of a crutch. There is a fine line between pressure and encouragement.

One word of caution: *The Silence Within*, [www.selective-mutism.com](http://www.selective-mutism.com), or any other current literature on selective mutism, states that it is imperative for this intervention to include individual sessions with the child; a key person working with the classroom teacher and parents. Hopefully, there is someone willing (preferably someone who is patient and soft spoken), who can be the key worker in your school. The "stimulus fading" strategy starts with one child and then one more at a time is added to form a small group. Most children with SM **will not speak in front of a whole group**. Please do not make it your goal as the classroom teacher to make this child talk in the classroom. You will be most frustrated. It doesn't work in a whole classroom setting. The anxiety has to be lessened slowly, in baby steps beginning individually with the child and the key worker.

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**The author of this article, Gail Kervatt, is an elementary school reading specialist** who successfully worked with a child with Selective Mutism. Gail has written a practical, informative book about her experience, entitled, *The Silence Within*. The book is a valuable resource for teachers and parents and is available from her website at [www.selectivemutism.com](http://www.selectivemutism.com), the Selective Mutism Group organization at [www.selectivemutism.org](http://www.selectivemutism.org), or to order through Amazon.com. This article and many others can be found in the new, *Supplement to The Silence Within*.