

What is Selective Mutism (SM)?

- SM is an anxiety disorder that makes an individual unable to speak in one or more social settings (e.g., at school, in public places, with peers) despite the ability to speak comfortably in other settings (e.g., at home with immediate family).
- SM is NOT a willful refusal to speak. It is not caused by trauma, abuse, or neglect.
- SM is diagnosed when this pattern persists and causes significant impairment in daily functioning. For example, a child might be unable to participate in school and this can interfere with the ability to make age-appropriate friendships.

People with SM may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- Speaks freely at home and with family but is too anxious to speak in public settings or around strangers
- Is paralyzed with fear or shuts down completely when unable to communicate
- Struggles to make eye contact when uncomfortable
- Relies on pointing, nodding, writing and other forms of nonverbal communication. Speaks through a trusted individual (e.g. whispering to a parent or friend at school).

Statistics:

- Approximately 1 in 140 children are affected by SM
- Age of onset is generally between 2-4 years of age but may become more apparent when a child enters school
- More common in females than males (2:1 ratio)
- >75% of children with SM also meet criteria for social anxiety disorder
- More common in multi-lingual youth but is not due to a lack of language skills or a discomfort with the spoken language (i.e., a “silent period” which can be normal when acquiring a second language).

Treatment:

- Studies show that behavioral and cognitive-behavioral therapy strategies are the most effective interventions for SM. Medication may also be helpful when combined with behavioral treatment.
- Treatment providers are often clinical psychologists, clinical social workers, professional counselors, or speech language pathologists. If a treating professional does not have experience with SM, it is recommended they learn about SM comprehensively.
- Teachers, school psychologists, school counselors, and other school staff are valuable partners in working with students with SM.
- At school, students may benefit from accommodations through a 504 plan or through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).