



Preschool Field Officer Service

Integrated Child, Youth and Family Services

Selective Mutism

What is Selective Mutism?

Selective Mutism is a term which describes children who choose not to speak within **at least one** social setting, despite being able to speak freely at other times. Children with Selective Mutism often speak freely at home with familiar people but do not speak at kinder or school; and it usually occurs in specific social settings before the child is 5 years of age. Selective Mutism is a psychological problem related to social anxiety. It is **not** the result of shyness, attention seeking or defiant behaviour.

What are the features of Selective Mutism?

- Refuse to speak in specific social settings
- In the social setting where the child chooses not to speak, the child may communicate using gesture
- Rarely make eye contact
- May demonstrate a high level of anxiety
- Often the child appears very shy
- Children may have a blank facial expression and rarely seem to smile

Why won't my child talk?

The reason a child will not speak is rarely related to a lack of knowledge or an inability to produce the sounds of speech. The child often wants to talk, but anxiety prevents them from speaking.

Where do I go for help, if I think my child has Selective Mutism?

The best place to start is to visit your family GP or Maternal and Child Health Nurse; they may recommend a referral to see a child psychologist, and/or a speech pathologist.

What is a child psychologist?

A child psychologist is a person who has specific training and experience in Educational and Developmental Psychology, and works with children, evaluating, diagnosing and helping resolve issues that are associated with the child's physical, cognitive, emotional, psychological, academic and social development.

Will it get better by itself?

It is natural for many children to be a little withdrawn or shy when they first start in a new social setting, such as kinder. If mutism persists for more than a month; it is recommended to discuss your concerns with your GP.

Evidence shows that Selective Mutism rarely gets better by itself and early intervention is crucial.

If left untreated a child with Selective Mutism may have difficulties with:

- Bullying
- Low self-esteem
- Increased anxiety
- Social communication problems
- Learning
- Long term academic progress
- Learning to talk

What can I do to help my child?

- It is important to recognise that your child is not being 'naughty' or defiant
- Let your child know that you accept and understand that it is difficult for him/her to speak
- Respond to all non-verbal forms of communication
- Praise and encourage all your child's efforts to communicate – verbal and non-verbal
- Try not to feel stressed when your child will not respond to someone speaking to him/her
- Provide choices to your child and encourage them to communicate their preferred choice through non-verbal communication or gesture
- Structure a special time each day to do something with your child, but without an expectation to speak
- Model appropriate language when interacting with your child

What should I avoid doing?

- Pressuring your child to speak in any way – "When you say 'please' you can play outside"
- Using labels or excuses in front of the child. "He's the quiet one" or "he's very shy"
- Withholding a reward for not speaking – "You didn't say goodbye to Mrs. Smith so you can't go to the park"
- Giving lots of attention for not speaking
- Pressuring the child to mix with others
- Making yourself feel that it is your job to make your child speak; your job is to create a relaxed and calm environment to reduce your child's anxiety.

Further information:

http://www.childdevelopment.com.au/images/Resources/Dx_pdfs/Selective_Mutism.pdf

<http://www.melbournecpc.com.au/selectivemutism.php>



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