

Why doesn't this child talk?

He or she has an anxiety disorder called Selective Mutism

Children suffering from selective mutism (SM) become mute in some social situations and CANNOT utter a sound

- Selective Mutism is a form of social communication anxiety disorder, which leads to difficulty with some social interactions.
- These children typically may not be able to speak, laugh out loud, make any noises, or move their lips in the school environment with both their peers and adults, despite speaking normally and fluently at home, in familiar settings and with familiar people.
- They are often also unable to initiate any social exchange and may be reluctant or slow to join in.
- They typically try to avoid, or are very slow to respond, in situations where they feel they are expected or required to speak.
- Some, but not all, children may also have difficulty smiling or making eye contact, and their body language and facial expressions may be rigid.
- These children are often very sensitive, alert and self aware, with high respect for rules and authority; they are non-disruptive and can be easily overlooked in the classroom by peers and adults alike.
- These children are NOT usually unhappy, shy and quiet; often they are quite the opposite when feeling relaxed!
- They are NOT rude, purposely ignoring you, or trying to get attention.
- Their behaviour is NOT due to wilfulness, stubbornness or manipulation.

Anxiety and fear can literally make it impossible for these children to speak.

For more information about Selective Mutism, please visit www.selectivemutism.org.uk

How to relate to a child with Selective Mutism

- **DO** convey to the child that you understand their difficulty and you are happy for him or her to speak when they feel ready.
- **DON'T** try to make the child speak or ask why he or she is not talking....this will only increase anxiety!
- **DO** provide many opportunities for speech to happen but remove from yourself and the child any expectation for him or her to speak.
- **DO** talk to the child normally but don't expect a response right away.
- **DO** use comments, statements, and rhetorical speech to elicit a response rather than direct questions.
- **DON'T** ask open-ended questions; instead phrase questions so that the child can respond non-verbally; choose YES/NO questions or questions where a one or two word answer will suffice.
- **DO** minimise eye contact; play side by side rather than facing the child; a low-key, matter-of-fact and a silly/fun approach works best!
- **DO** make him or her feel included and valued by encouraging their non-verbal participation in ALL activities; try to give him or her responsibilities and tasks that they can feel proud of doing; give lots of praise and reward these accomplishments.
- **DO** build a closer rapport with the child by getting down on the ground to play at their level and finding out what subjects really interest him or her.
- **DO** stand up for the child when others ask why he or she isn't speaking; make sure everyone knows the child can speak at home and when ready he or she will also speak at school.
- **DO** watch out for any bullying as these children are vulnerable and cannot stand up for themselves.
- **DON'T** act surprised or 'make a big deal over it' if the child does begin to speak, as this may embarrass them and cause a setback.

Just enjoy, have fun and get to know the selectively mute child, who has so much to say, is keen to talk, but needs some time, help and encouragement from you to relax and to be able to do it!

SMIRA

Selective Mutism Information & Research Association

www.selectivemutism.org.uk