

Not everyone has the freedom to speak everywhere



Traffic Jam

You can't hear what I want to say
My word's get stuck in a traffic jam
How will you ever know
Who I am?
You can't hear what I want to say
You look like a giant
And I want to run away.
You can't hear what I want to say
I heard you shout
Just the other day
You can't hear what I want to say
You want me to speak
I feel like a freak.
You can't hear what I want to say
My word's get stuck in a traffic jam
How will you ever like
Who I am?

By Shannon

Aged 8

What is Selective Mutism?

Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder of childhood in which affected children speak fluently in some situations but remain silent in others, hence its alternative name of Situational Mutism.

The condition usually begins early in life and may occur after major changes, such as starting school or being admitted to hospital. With early intervention the prognosis for recovery is good, but in rare cases it can persist right through a child's school life and sometimes even into adulthood.

It is important to understand that those with SM want to speak, but find themselves physically unable to do so, due to their overwhelming anxiety.

These children usually do not talk to their teachers and can also be silent with their peers, although they may communicate non-verbally. Other combinations of non-speaking can also occur, affecting specific members of the child's family. Often the child has no other identifiable problems and converses freely at home or with close friends. He/she may make age-appropriate progress at school in areas where speaking is not required.

The essential feature of Selective Mutism is the persistent failure to speak in specific social situations (e.g. at school, with peers and/or the teacher), despite being able to speak in other, less anxiety provoking situations.

Children with Selective Mutism are likely to...

- **Find it difficult to look at you when they are anxious** - they may turn their heads away and *seem* to ignore you. You might think that they are being unfriendly, but they are not - they are just not able to respond.
- **Not smile, or look blank or expressionless** when anxious - in school, they will be feeling anxious most of the time and this is why it is hard for them to smile, laugh or show their true feelings.
- **Move stiffly or awkwardly** when anxious, or if they think that they are being watched.
- **Find it incredibly difficult to answer the register, or to say hello, goodbye or thank-you** - this can seem rude or hurtful, but it is not intentional.
- **Be slow to respond** - in any way - to a question.
- **Become more anxious when under pressure to speak.**
- **Worry more than other people**
- **Be emotionally sensitive**
- **Be physically sensitive** e.g. to noise, smells, touch, crowds.
- **Be very sensitive to the reactions of others** - they may misinterpret these reactions.
- **Find it difficult to express their own feelings** - if it provokes further anxiety.

Can Selectively Mute children be helped?

Yes, but *early identification is important*, so that some form of intervention can be planned. The condition may not improve spontaneously. If the child is not speaking after a time of 'settling in', then the school's Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) should be consulted and expert advice sought.

ABOUT SMIRA - Selective Mutism Information and Research Association

SMIRA is a charity set up to support parents and carers of children with Selective Mutism and to provide information to professionals working with children who have SM.

Teachers, Psychologists, Speech & Language Therapists, Psychiatrists and other interested professionals are also encouraged to join, as there is need for improved awareness, co-operation and co-ordination between all concerned with the treatment of a child.

SMIRA gives parents and professionals an opportunity to feel less isolated and share ideas with others who have experienced similar problems in either home, school or treatment situations.

www.selectivemutism.org.uk