

Helping a New Partner join a Family where there is a child with Selective Mutism

Generally, children with selective mutism (SM) are most comfortable around those they have always lived with; this commonly includes parents, siblings and other familiar individuals who have always resided alongside the child - for example a live-in grandparent. Integrating a new, less familiar, adult into the home environment can therefore be problematic.

When in a comfortable, familiar environment (usually at home), children with pure SM will speak and interact in ways that are both age appropriate and characteristic of their own personality; however there is a discernible cut off point between the child's immediate family and people outside their comfort zone. When people outside the child's nuclear family enter the home, the child will tend to experience a marked rise in anxiety, this is when the characteristic symptoms of SM start to appear. Typically; the child appears more subdued than usual; facial expression may be frozen (unable to smile or react); there is a failure to speak (frequently, even when the child is spoken to); the child may markedly avoid eye contact; may become distressed; may fail to eat while being watched; may try to hide or avoid entering the room; may attempt to whisper to a familiar adult only. Young children may freeze completely when spoken to by an unfamiliar adult. All these responses can seem like rejection or dislike of the outsider if the child's anxiety is not properly understood.

Integrating a new partner into a family which includes a child with SM can be particularly stressful, both for the child and main carer. In part, this can be because there is an expectation for that partner to assume a parental role and form a bond with the child as soon as possible. When this does not happen, frustration can build in both the natural parent and new partner which only feeds the child's anxiety. If there is a concern or expectation that the child will be resentful of the new relationship the SM behaviour is likely to reinforce this belief and be mistaken for defiance. The natural parent's attempt to explain the situation can appear at best over-protective and at worst, disloyal to the new partner.

Thus, successfully integrating a partner into a family with a selectively mute child can be a challenge! But if it is carried through in a sympathetic step-by-step fashion, a trusting relationship can be achieved.

Dos and Don'ts

Do...

- Explain in detail about your child's condition and back this up with written information. Encourage your partner to go online or do some reading about SM (see useful references and website below).

- Remember that your partner may initially get the impression that the child dislikes him/her and may be feeling confused or disappointed; an selectively mute child that doesn't speak, pointedly looks the other way and never smiles, may give that impression! It is important that you stress that the child is simply reacting to his/her feelings of anxiety.
- Understand that it may take time for your partner to digest all this information which may go right against their natural instincts. But however hurt, helpless, angry or frustrated they may feel, it is vital to remain calm. Any disapproval, disappointment or unreasonable demands will make it even harder for the child to relax and behave normally in their company.
- Remove all pressure on the child to speak until he or she is comfortable enough for this to happen naturally. You and your partner should continue to speak to the child and include him/her in all family activities as usual but avoid direct questions and make it clear that your new partner is more interested in enjoying their company than hearing them speak. It is good to include siblings (when present) as this provides familiarity and may draw the child's focus away from your partner; this will ultimately help the child get used to their presence.
- Always respond positively and warmly to any attempts by the child to communicate either verbally or otherwise! Pointing, nodding, drawing, listening to a story and sharing activities and interests such as football, cycling, swimming etc. are all valuable forms of communication, each a step nearer to talking.
- Whenever possible, you and your child should take short breaks away from the company of others, this will allow him/her to talk freely to you and convey urgent needs, without having to resort to whispering in your ear. This is particularly important when relatively long periods of time are spent in company.
- At first, allow long periods of quality time together with your child, in the absence of your partner; this will reduce anxiety; allowing your child to return to his /her normal self and speak freely. Ideally your partner can gradually be included in these periods, first by occupying themselves nearby, then as an observer, and finally by taking part in your game or activity as the child gets used to speaking at normal volume in front of them.
- Reassure your partner that the child's inability to speak and interact freely is only a temporary setback and with time, perseverance and patience the situation will resolve! Likewise, explain to the child that talking and relaxing will get easier in time.
- Do remain in charge of your child. Retain full responsibility for the day-to-day discipline and management of your child. Handing over control to your partner is likely to greatly increase your child's anxiety. For many children, SM tends to be highly contextual in nature i.e. an adult taking on the role of an authority figure tends to be more intimidating than one acting as a trusted friend; that is

why it is important for your partner to concentrate on building a trusting friendship, rather than quickly assuming a parental role, bearing in mind the child also has an absent father/mother with whom he/she may or may not have a talking relationship.

- Do inform your child's nursery or school about the change in family circumstances; as this may influence your child's behaviour outside the home. SM children find all change difficult, even the little things in life, but with time to prepare, understand and adjust, they can happily adapt to a new situation.

Don't...

- Don't feel that you have to choose between the child and your partner! Try and get your partner on side, his or her co-operation will ultimately bring the family closer together in the long term!
- Don't ask leading questions such as "Why don't you like John?"
Young SM children are unlikely to be aware of the concept of anxiety, so won't be able to explain their behaviour in terms of feeling anxious. In fact they are unlikely to be aware that their behaviour is odd at all! Behaviours such as avoiding eye contact, failure to speak and frozen facial expressions are instinctive reactions to anxiety provoking stimuli. There is no conscious thought involved, on the part of the child; in other words these behaviours are not premeditated! If it is suggested that the child dislikes someone, it is likely to lead to confusion on the part of the child, he/she may simply agree with you because you're an adult!
- Don't be pressured and try not to be upset by relatives or friends that advocate a zero tolerance, quick fix approach. SM is not widely recognised or understood by the public at large, so for those unfamiliar with the condition, it is tempting to think that it can be easily dealt with by confronting or correcting the child. This will make matters worse as you will no doubt have discovered already! Any parent with experience of a selectively mute child will tell you that patience and perseverance are required, over a prolonged period of time.

Useful references

- The free downloads section on: <http://www.selectivemutism.co.uk/> especially *What is Selective Mutism?* and *Planning and Managing a Small Steps Programme*
- "The Selective Mutism Resource Manual" by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens especially Chapter 2, Frequently Asked Questions, Chapter 6, Creating the Right Environment and Chapter 9, the Sliding-in Technique.
- 'Silent Children' DVD available from SMIRA <http://www.selectivemutism.co.uk/>
- 'My Child Won't Speak' – documentary made by Landmark Films, shown on BBC1, Feb 2010