

A guide about

identifying a child with selective mutism

Does your child stop talking in certain situations?

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder that prevents children speaking in a range of social situations, such as playgroup activities, school lessons or in public. However, they're able to speak freely in other situations, such as to close family and friends when nobody else is listening.

The child is not voluntarily refusing to speak but is unable to speak freely, feeling frozen in certain social situations. This sensation is so distressing that the child copes by avoiding the need to speak as much as possible. Appropriate support is essential to overcome selective mutism.

Shy children are generally unsure of themselves and usually welcome help with joining in, whereas children with selective mutism have a specific dread of speaking.

Who is affected?

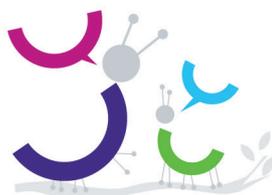
- Selective mutism affects one in 150 children.
- It's more common in girls and children who are self-conscious about making mistakes (when learning a new language for example).
- Selective mutism usually occurs in early childhood and is first noticed when the child begins to interact outside the family circle, for example, when the child starts nursery or school.
- Any sensitive child can develop selective mutism – it is not a sign of bad parenting.

What are the signs?

- The child does not talk to or in front of certain people for at least one month, not including the first month at school or nursery.
- Children with selective mutism often have other fears and social anxieties.
- They may have additional speech and language difficulties.
- When expected to speak, they may not be able to give you eye contact and may seem frozen, nervous, socially awkward, clingy, excessively shy and withdrawn; but at other times they may appear confident and even succeed in communicating via gesture etc.
- There may be instances of stubbornness or aggression linked to pressure to speak and temper tantrums when the child gets home from school.

Top tips to support a child with selective mutism

- Reassure them that they'll be able to speak when they're ready.
- Concentrate on having fun – remove any pressure on the child to speak.
- Praise all efforts the child makes to join in and interact with others (such as passing and taking toys, nodding, pointing) – these are important small steps towards speaking.
- Allow children to talk through their parents, friends or siblings – the more they talk in front of other people without any fuss being made, the sooner they'll overcome their fear.
- Talk to someone if you are at all worried – maybe someone at your school, nursery, children's centre or surgery can help – or see page two.
- Do not wait for your child to grow out of it. It is important for everyone involved, especially school and family, to write down agreed strategies which can be reviewed and updated regularly.



Further information on selective mutism

- **NHS choices** | www.nhs.uk/conditions/selective-mutism
- **Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA)** | www.smira.org.uk
- **'Can I tell you about Selective Mutism? A guide for friends, family and professionals'** from Jessica Kingsley Publishers (www.jkp.com) – all royalties to SMIRA

Contact us

Please contact the Children's Therapies Department if you have any queries or concerns regarding the information in this leaflet.

Visit: www.kentcht.nhs.uk/thepod

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