

A Short Summary of Selective Mutism Do's and Don'ts in School

A child with Selective Mutism is usually chatty at home but silent when in the company of other people. These people may include people known to the child such as familiar relatives and casual acquaintances, or people such as shop assistants who are strangers. Selective Mutism can often be identified incorrectly as 'shyness' which the child will likely outgrow, and parents are often told not to worry. However, if treatment for SM is not received, the condition is likely to continue throughout the person's life. There are many teens and young adults dealing with SM, and in adults this condition is likely to become more debilitating. Those with SM can struggle to find work, study, or make friends, and they can develop other conditions, such as social anxiety, social phobia, panic disorder, agoraphobia, substance abuse, depression, and generalised anxiety, etc. It is therefore paramount to help those with this condition as early as possible. It is important to note that SM is not a behavioural condition, meaning the child is not "choosing" not to speak.

A person with SM may:

- Appear deaf and easily miss instructions, making work difficult to complete.
- Struggle with making and maintaining eye contact.
- Be unable to talk in given situations or to certain people, though some may whisper.
- Be unable to use their hand muscles to write and draw etc.
- Be unable to hold up signs or even point.
- Be unable to smile and wave.
- Be unable to ask questions or seek help.

It is possible to hear the child speaking in some situations and not others, for example, in the playground, or to other children. It is vital to remember that Selective Mutism has earned its name because it is "Selective" to the situation and/or person.

Sadly, all too often Selective Mutism is misunderstood and the person can get wrongly labelled as:

- Stubborn
- Manipulative
- Rude
- Obstinate
- A day dreamer
- Shy
- Difficult

Those with SM cannot control the frozen response; it is an unconscious reaction and those with SM DO NOT understand what is going on themselves.

Those with Selective Mutism are most often out-going and highly intelligent individuals who yearn to fit in and to be accepted.

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***What to do* when working with someone with SM**

If you are new to the class then do introduce yourself to the child and give them an explanation of what will be happening. A warm smile and friendly approach will help them feel comfortable and safe as you create a trusting and safe environment.

- Do include them in all activities if they are happy to do so.
- Do give them opportunities to speak, but without pressure to answer.
- Ask indirect questions which allow them to answer without direct attention.
- Do use humour and games.
- Do be patient and understanding.
- Do repeat an instruction if necessary.
- Do allow them to whisper to a friend if they can, and do allow that friend to answer for them.
- Do give them work and do check that they understand the instructions.
- Do talk to the parent and discuss with them any worries or concerns you may have, and seek advice from them to what they know will help make the person/child most comfortable.

***What not to do* when working with someone with SM**

- Avoid direct questions that will out the child on the spot.
- Do not insist the child answers the role.
- Do not insist the child communicates by other means, for example using a whiteboard or paper, or sign language, unless the child is comfortable with this.
- Avoid drawing attention to the child.
- Avoid giving direct eye contact.

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- Do not take offence if they cannot answer you.

It is important to not place pressure on the child to communicate with you as the pressure will worsen the SM. Working with an SM child is incredibly rewarding as these individuals are full of personality and most often have a loving kind nature with much to give.

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