

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

Children with selective mutism (SM) are typically chatty at home but silent in other social places such as school or to certain people. These people can include people known to the child such as teachers, familiar relatives, as well as casual acquaintances, or people such as shop assistants who are strangers. Children do not outgrow selective mutism and they are not necessarily shy. Unfortunately, there are many young teens and adults struggling to find work, study, or make friends. Unsupported, selective mutism can manifest into other conditions, such as social anxiety, social phobia, panic disorder, agoraphobia, substance abuse, depression, and generalised anxiety, etc. Therefore, it is critical to help those with this condition as early as possible and to understand that the child is not “selecting” when to speak. Selective mutism has earned its name because it is “selective” to the situation and/or person due to the anxiety/freeze response of the child. This is why in some situations, such as the playground, or to other children, you may hear the child 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; although 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

Sadly, and all too often Selective Mutism is wrongly labelled as:

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

These children cannot control the freeze response; it is an unconscious reaction and those with selective mutism **DO NOT** understand what is happening themselves.

Toni Pakula 2017 ©

Disclaimer: This information is intended to provide general information to the public and is no way intended to replace professional medical advice.

***What to do* when working with someone with selective mutism**

If you are new to the class, then please introduce yourself to the child and give them an explanation of what will be happening during the day. 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.

***What not to do* when working with someone with selective mutism**

- Avoid direct questions that will put the child on the spot
- Do not insist the child answers to roll call
- 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
- Do not take offence if the child cannot answer you.

It is important to not place pressure on the child to communicate as the pressure will worsen the SM. Working with a child who has SM is incredibly rewarding; as you build the trust you will see their voice will start to emerge naturally.

Toni Pakula 2017 ©

Disclaimer: This information is intended to provide general information to the public and is no way intended to replace professional medical advice.