

Selective Mutism: A Teacher's Guide

Transcript

Heather: Selective mutism is the child's inability to speak or to communicate within specific social situations. This could be within the school environment or with specific individuals.

Asha: It's often more common in girls, and particularly with children that are learning English as a second language. Selective mutism for the young person, the thought of communicating in a specific situation is really distressing for them. So what can happen is that at home, maybe, they have no difficulties with communicating with the parents or their siblings, but what happens might be at school that they don't communicate. It's not that they don't want to, it's that they find it really distressing emotionally. So it might be that they verbally don't communicate. They might communicate using hand signals or nodding, or they might not communicate at all. So when they're faced in a situation that selective mutism is taking place, you might see that the child becomes very still all of a sudden. They'll also have difficulty with eye contact as well, so if you continue to try and gain eye contact, it's going to make that young person feel even more uncomfortable.

So, working with young people that have selective mutism within your classroom, it's important that you build up their confidence and reassure them that it is safe to communicate with them and that they can feel that it is okay. And they learn that experience as well that, actually, what they were thinking was so bad, actually they start to realise that it wasn't as bad as they thought. One of the ways that you can do that is gradually giving them incentives. So it's important that, it's not on a typical reward sanction basis—that you take things away if they don't engage in communication—but when they do engage that you do incentivise them. So it might be that you engage and they get to engage in a particular game, or if you know that they've got a particular hobby or an interest. Those are the things that you can support and draw upon to develop their confidence and reassure them that it's safe to communicate with yourself.

Heather: Teachers can support children in the school environment who have selective mutism by providing them with distractions. These can include responsibilities, delegating out different tasks to them. This could be things from giving out books or handing out the Pritt sticks.

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Asha: Or maybe using flashcards or picture cards, a young person can communicate their basic needs, too. It's also important that you still engage with the child, whether it's through play or through giving them some directions and getting them involved without them having to communicate verbally to you, for example.

Heather: Some strategies that you can use to support children in the environment may be introducing a prop. You can then use this to talk around the child and perhaps speak with other children within the classroom and focus your discussion on said prop. You can also then ensure that the prop is the centre of the conversation. Get down to the child's level and use it to encourage open-ended questions.

Asha: It's very important that teachers are patient. Feeling that you're getting somewhere can feel actually it's quite a slow process. It can be quite frustrating for the teachers, so it's also important to acknowledge that despite the efforts the teacher is making, it can be very slow and a long process. So it's important that the teacher manages their own expectations as well, because what can happen, you can transfer those expectations indirectly onto that child and they feel even more pressured to engage in a conversation.

Heather: The end goal is to build up confidence by and improving successful speaking experiences, to allow the child to feel relaxed, to ensure that they're having fun and that they feel safe in the environment.