



FACT FILE

SELECTIVE MUTISM

WHAT IS SELECTIVE MUTISM?

Selective Mutism is a complex and severe anxiety disorder which causes a child to have difficulty speaking or communicating in certain social situations.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

The most obvious sign that a child is struggling with Selective Mutism is their inability to speak or communicate in certain social situations. Some may be able to speak to particular individuals around them, but not everyone. Some may talk very quietly or sparsely. On the more severe end, a child may not be able to make any non-verbal communication at all; evidenced by being completely motionless, with blank expressions and averting their gaze to avoid eye contact.

Other symptoms include defiant or oppositional behaviour, extreme shyness, clinging to caregivers and social isolation.

STRATEGIES

Avoid pressuring or bribing

The key is to encourage a relaxing environment so that the experience of talking is one which has positive and affirming associations, rather than being negative or humiliating. Reassure the child that you understand that speaking seems to be a difficult experience for them currently, but with time and patience they will be able to communicate without feeling this intense fear.

Praise the child

Avoid showing preference on verbal communication over non-verbal communication. Praise a child when they do communicate, but not openly in front of others, as this may cause more embarrassment.

Allow for pauses

Don't rush to 'rescue' a child from talking, as this will prevent them from tolerating their anxiety. Allow for long pauses. Gradually increase the number of people the child is around as they start to communicate freely.