



Talk4Meaning

Supporting children's communication and learning

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Quietness? Shyness? Or Selective Mutism?

Our aim is for all children to develop as confident speakers. However some children are confident speakers at home, but need more support than others to talk in our settings. Practitioners often describe children who talk well at home, but who are silent in the setting as 'selectively mute/elective mute/my mute little girl/my selective mute'. They may also say, "He talks well at home but *chooses* not to speak with us." None of these descriptions is likely to be accurate! Selective mutism is relatively uncommon, but many children find talking in settings and school difficult, even though they talk a lot at home. It is rare for children to *choose* to be silent. What is going on? What should we say, and how can we help?

Children who are shy

Many of us, males and females, are 'shy' by nature. One way to describe shyness is that we have "a reserved and restrained temperament, and have a natural tendency to be wary of new people. We may never grow out of this general uncertainty completely." (Johnson & Wintgens).

Children who are shy often gradually 'warm up' over time, and with familiarity, but remain wary in new situations, with unfamiliar people. They respond well to adult support, and particularly as their social skills develop. They are usually confident in talking with other children.

Children who are quiet

Boys and girls can respond to our settings by being 'very quiet', even though they talk well at home. It is usually a temporary state of affairs, and may be caused by being overwhelmed in our busy settings. They may lack confidence with talking with unfamiliar adults and children, and particularly lack confidence in talking in *groups*. With support they overcome their quietness, and 'find their voice'. This is often a temporary response. It is possible that some children who are 'highly sensitive', and particularly to noise, may respond by being quiet.

Children in the 'silent phase' of learning English as an additional language

Many young children in the very early stages of learning a second language go through a 'silent phase'. They spend a lot of time listening, and working out important things, like when one word ends and another one begins! They may be shy or quiet as well, but children often emerge from this stage as chatty individuals who then learn their new language by talking a lot!

Children with Selective Mutism

Children with selective mutism speak freely with only a small number of people with whom they feel comfortable. Typically the children are able to speak at home, with family members, but experience extreme *anxiety* about speaking outside the home. This anxiety is so strong that the children describe experiencing an actual physical blockage in their throats, (though none actually exists). Unlike most communication difficulties, selective mutism is more common in girls than boys. Boys with selective mutism often have additional communication difficulties, such as a speech impediment or stammer.

Selective mutism may begin as extreme shyness in pre-school years, and develop into extreme selective mutism by the time the child starts school. The condition was originally known as '*elective*' mutism, as it was thought that the children were *choosing* to be silent in public. It is now generally accepted that the children do want to speak, but their anxiety, or phobia, prevents them from speaking in certain selected situations, and most typically at school.

Various approaches are used to help children with selective mutism, but it is generally recognised that the longer the condition persists, and particularly if it continues into secondary school, the more difficult it is for children to develop as confident speakers. Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, two UK Speech and Language Therapists, have developed very successful techniques that are widely used throughout the UK, and based on the concept of gradually developing a sense of *confident speaking* in a range of situations, but especially at school. A key aspect is to develop strong links between school and home, so that successful speaking at home can be gradually developed into confident speaking at school.

Things that help

- Encourage children to talk, through natural conversation and book sharing.
- Look at pressures in your setting, and making changes for *all* children. For example, do we need to call the register and children answer their names? How do we organise group time (Small groups? Do we need to sit in a circle?)
- Singing in a group can help children to 'find their voice' without anyone noticing or drawing attention to them.
- Make strong links with home. Make 'all about me' boxes, for children to share with you and other children (individually and in small groups to start off with).
- Share your concerns with parents, but be aware that how we talk about children is important. Labels can inhibit children and families from moving forward (especially if they are inaccurate!)
- Agree how you are going to talk about the children. Everyone needs to practice using positive phrases; like 'This is Lauren, she talks a lot at home, and we are helping her grow in confidence in pre-school'.
- Ask for help. Ask for advice from advisors. Consider referral to Speech and Language Therapy.
- Praise children for making small steps towards talking, e.g. by quietly saying, 'You had a good go at talking in our group today. I bet that felt good'. (But avoid making a big fuss, like giving stickers.)

For more information on Selective Mutism

- Visit SMIRA at www.selectivemutism.co.uk
- *The Selective Mutism Handbook*, by Maggie Johnson & Alison Wintgens (Speechmark Publishers)
- *The Highly Sensitive Child*, by Elaine N Aron (Thorsons Publishers)

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