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Please don't be quiet!

Michael Jones speaks up on how to support quiet and anxious children

Grace is six and has been at her primary school for two years. At home she is boisterous and chatty with members of her immediate family, but the adults in her school have yet to hear her speak. One staff member reports that she "won't answer when her name is called during registration and refuses to talk to any of the adults.

She is beginning to whisper to certain children in the playground, as long as no adults are within earshot. Yet, when her mum comes to pick her up, she will talk quite freely to her, once she is outside the school gates."

Staff are, naturally, very concerned. They initially described Grace as "just shy", but because she talks to her mother when she collects her at the

In school, children often feel the need to compete with each other to attract an adult's attention

end of the session, they are beginning to wonder whether Grace is an "elective mute". Grace's mother says that Grace behaved in exactly the same way when she was at preschool, though there she was unable to talk to other children.

Unfortunately, mum, who describes herself as having been "painfully shy" when she was at school, has researched elective mutism on the internet, and has become very confused and alarmed. Her search engine refused to accept "elective mutism" and automatically changed the search to "selective mutism". This led to hundreds of entries, many of them suggesting that her child has "high anxiety" and "social phobia", and is possibly using refusal to speak as a way of gaining control, or that it is a symptom of trauma or even abuse. Up to this point, Grace's mother was confident that she was doing a good job as a parent, but now she has become anxious that her daughter is "starting to have the same problems" that she went through.

Although selective mutism in children is relatively rare, the situation I have just described is quite common, and it is essential that all adults working with young children are clear about why some children are very quiet, and what to do about it.



Children who are shy

Maggie Johnson, co-author of *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual*, says that it is particularly important to understand the difference between shyness and selective mutism: "Many children can be described as 'reluctant talkers' outside their homes, and being shy is just one of the reasons for this. Some shy or timid children are often lacking in confidence with unfamiliar people, and especially in groups. They may have a quiet temperament, or possibly a sensitive disposition, or have low self-esteem. Children with low self-esteem expect that nothing they do will be right, including talking."

Children who are described as shy have a natural tendency to be wary of new situations and people. They may feel anxious if they are suddenly asked to do something that they have not tried before. This may be especially noticeable in a group. The children feel very self-conscious, which may manifest itself in the children blushing or becoming tearful. Shy and quiet children may function well at home because they are in an environment that is predictable. Language at home is also very predictable, where children, in general, begin conversations and adults respond. Children are therefore much more familiar with topics of conversation, which are often very repetitive and based around daily routines. This can be the opposite in school, where children may feel the need to compete with each other to attract and maintain an adult's attention through talk.

Children who are shy may initially talk very quietly to a few adults and children, but are more likely to talk freely once they get to know the staff and routines. This is particularly the case if they are encouraged to join in with group activities where adults avoid putting them under pressure to speak. They are usually keen to join in with group activities, as long as they are not put on the spot, for example, by being asked to

go first. When faced with a new activity, shy children usually need to see another child get the activity right and, most importantly, need to see someone make a mistake, so that they can see how adults react. While they welcome and respond well to adult support, children who are shy may remain uncertain in new situations, or with unfamiliar people.

Children with high sensitivity

Some children may be quiet because they are highly sensitive. Dr Elaine Aron, author of *The Highly Sensitive Child*, gives a detailed description of what she calls high sensitivity or sensory processing sensitivity. "It is a genetically inherited trait characterised by depth of processing and sensory sensitivity. It is a normal trait found in 15-20% of the population. It often displays itself in an innate 'pause to check' type of behaviour, in which the person prefers to observe and wait before acting. Highly sensitive children are more aware of subtleties and tend to be more affected or over-stimulated by their physical or emotional environment than (other) people."

According to Aron, children with high sensitivity may be silent because, "they avoid the high stimulation involved in meeting strangers and as a result become increasingly unskilled and over-aroused when they do have to speak to strangers....Further, many have experienced painful rejections for being 'too quiet' or 'lost in thoughts'."

Barbara Allen-Williams, founder of the National Centre for High Sensitivity, has observed that "Highly sensitive children experience a great deal of over-stimulation and 'new-ness'. While they are young they are introduced to many new people, things and experiences. They can find this totally overloading to their senses. Even at a young age they may be aware that they appear to be the only one who is not enjoying a new or boisterous experience, leading to self-doubt, fear and shame."

Some teenagers fail to understand why small-talk can be useful

Amy Eleftheriades, an educational consultant who works with older children, their families and schools, is exploring how deeper issues of communication may have an impact on children becoming silent. These can include teenagers failing to understand why small-talk and banter with their peers can be useful, and failing to appreciate the very subtle ways that we use non-verbal signals to keep conversations going.

The silent phase

Many young children in the very early stages of learning a second language go through a silent phase. This is an active silence, when they spend a lot of time listening and working out important aspects of their new language, such as when one word ends and another one begins. Children often emerge from this stage as chatty individuals who then learn their new language by talking a lot. However, some children who may have a shy, anxious or highly sensitive nature may need more support during their silent phase, to make sure that they join in activities with other children, so that they are getting the practice they need to learn their new language with confidence.

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 familiar family members, but experience extreme anxiety about speaking outside their home. This anxiety is so strong that the children often describe experiencing an actual

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Selective mutes can fear hearing their own voice outside the family environment.

physical blockage in their throats, possibly caused by muscular tension. The condition was originally referred to as "elective" mutism because it was thought that the children were electing or choosing to be silent. It is now generally recognised that these children have developed a fear of hearing their voice outside the family and have little or no control over their reaction.

Maggie Johnson says that practitioners can make a clear distinction between children who are shy and those with selective mutism by observing their reactions to adults. "Shy children are generally unsure of themselves and usually welcome help with joining in, whereas children with selective mutism have a specific dread of speaking. They may suddenly shut down, back off, or become almost frozen or rooted to the spot and unable to respond. They become wary of what they perceive to be a threat to make them talk. They may also be too 'frozen' to communicate non-verbally, including making eye contact, smiling, nodding or pointing. They often develop a response of 'silent watchfulness', where they have become extremely sensitive to the possibility

that adults may put pressure on them to talk."

Providing appropriate support

So how should the staff at Grace's school respond to her? The very first action to be taken to support any child with anxiety about talking in groups, and particularly if the child has selective mutism, involves all the adults working together. Everyone needs to believe that Grace is not choosing to be silent, but finds herself unable to talk in certain situations and with certain people. Adults who say, "Grace won't talk to us" should be encouraged to say, "Grace is a confident talker at home, and we are helping to build her confidence at school." The fact that Grace is beginning to talk to other children should be seen as a positive step in the right direction.

There also needs to be an agreement to reduce pressure for Grace to talk. As Maggie Johnson explains in a training DVD produced by The Selective Mutism Information and Research Association, "We often find that once the pressure is off the children to talk, they relax and speech begins to emerge naturally".

Anxiety is so strong that children often describe experiencing a physical blockage in their throats

However, we need to let children know that there is no pressure to rush into talking and that it is OK for them to talk when they are ready.

If, like Grace, children have been silent for several years, though, their own self-image may be of "one who never talks". In these cases, children will need a structured programme to gradually desensitise them to their fear, and to help them to develop their confidence as a talker throughout school. If school staff decide that the time is right to introduce a structured programme, it will be vital to enlist the support of local professionals with experience of selective mutism. This is often the local speech and language therapy service, possibly working in conjunction with educational psychologists. Parents will also need to be fully involved with the programme. **SEN**

Useful reading

- Aron, E.N. (2003) *The Highly Sensitive Child*, Thorsons.
- Johnson, M. and Wintgens, A. (2002) *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual*, Speechmark Publishers.
- Johnson, M. And Wintgens, A. (2012) *Can I Tell You About Selective Mutism?* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Further information

Michael Jones is a freelance educational trainer who has written extensively on the subject of children's communication: His latest book, *Supporting Quiet Children*, is co-authored by Maggie Johnson: www.talk4meaning.co.uk

Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA): www.smira.org.uk