



# Understanding Selective Mutism in young children: A guide for Early Years Practitioners and Parents.

Written by Kate Hemingway, Speech and Language Therapist  
March, 2026

## Introduction

Children's speech language and communication skills develop differently, but for some children speaking in some situations can be extremely difficult. Selective Mutism is a condition that can affect a child's ability to speak in certain situations. Understanding Selective Mutism can help teachers and parents in creating environments where children feel safe, secure and able to communicate with other people.

## What is Selective Mutism?



Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder where a child is able to speak in some social situations, such as at home with close family. However they find it very difficult or sometimes even impossible to speak in other environments including nursery and school or around people that they are not familiar with.

When learning to understand Selective Mutism it's important to understand that children with Selective Mutism are not 'shy' or choosing to stay silent. Sometimes children are wrongly perceived as being 'stubborn' or 'naughty' but this is not the case. Asking a child with selective mutism to speak is similar to asking an adult with arachnophobia to pick up a spider! In many cases a child might want to speak but their anxiety is overwhelming and makes it almost physically impossible to speak.

Selective Mutism affects approximately 1 in 140 children and is more common in girls and those who have migrated from another country, language or culture. Selective Mutism is more noticeable when a child begins nursery and school and has to interact with people outside their family.



## Signs to look for

Children with Selective Mutism may display a range of behaviors. It is important to remember that every child is different and their behaviors may differ depending on the situation and the child's comfort zone. Some commonly occurring signs are:

- Speaking freely at home but rarely or never speaking in nursery or school.
- Preferring to communicate through gestures, nodding, pointing, or whispering.
- Avoiding eye contact when asked questions.
- Appearing “frozen”, stiff, anxious or very quiet in group situations.
- Becoming anxious when they feel under pressure to speak e.g. when adults say ‘tell them about...’
- on a familiar adult or friend to communicate for them.

## What Causes Selective Mutism?

The exact cause of Selective Mutism is not always clear. but Selective Mutism is strongly linked to anxiety and can be linked to other anxieties such as separation anxiety. Children who become distressed about separating from their parents or carers may be at higher risk. Children who have speech and language delays or hearing problems may find speaking more stressful. Other factors that may increase the risk of selective mutism include language differences, bilingual backgrounds and a family history of anxiety. When discussing the causes of Selective Mutism, it's very important to keep in mind that it is not due to poor parenting or stubbornness. Selective Mutism is also different to Post Traumatic Stress, where a child may suddenly stop talking in environments in which they previously displayed no difficulty following a traumatic experience. .



## How can parents and practitioners support children with Selective Mutism?

It's important that children with Selective Mutism have supportive and understanding environments to make it feel safe enough to communicate. This can be done through:

**Reducing the pressure:** Not asking direct questions, but instead using comments and choices that allow non-verbal gestures.

**Accepting non-verbal communication:** All efforts to communicate should be valued and respond to including pointing, leading, using pictures and symbols

**Don't avoid certain situations:** For example, performances or circle time but consider what environmental changes are necessary to make the situation more comfortable for the child.

**Plan nonverbal activities:** Plan small group activities that the child can participate in non verbally e.g. by placing their picture on a board or making a choice between 2 objects rather than by speaking.

**Celebrate effort:** Praise the child for their participation, engagement and their attempt to communicate in any form.

**Let the child know:** Let the child know that you understand how difficult and scary it is for them to speak with others at times and reassure them that talking will become easier.

Don't let them become labelled as 'A child who doesn't talk'. If other children ask, acknowledge that the child finds talking difficult sometimes but we all find some things difficult and they'll talk when they feel ready.

**Comment don't question:** This is particularly important for children with Selective Mutism. Play alongside them and comment on what you and they are doing 'my cars going over the bridge', 'uh oh I've spilt the juice' etc. Leave silences for the child to add their own comments but don't put any pressure on them to do so.

**Work with family:** Early Years Practitioners can also support children by working closely with parents to understand the needs of the child. as well as creating quiet environments where play based activities can be completed in a relaxed environment.

### When to seek additional support



Many children may go through a period of shyness in a new setting or become quieter for a short period after a significant change in routine e.g. changing room or moving house.

However, if a child continues to display difficulty speaking in certain situations that lasts longer than 2-3 months, it is advisable to seek additional support and refer the child to a Speech and Language Therapist. They will be able to diagnose selective mutism if appropriate and support you to make environmental modifications and implement effective strategies.

### Final Thoughts

With patience, empathy and implementing the correct support strategies, children with Selective Mutism can gradually build the confidence needed to communicate in different settings. By recognising the signs early and responding with understanding rather than pressure adults can make a significant difference in helping children feel safe and move beyond the early stages of Selective Mutism.

## References and Further reading



Johnson, M (2016) The Selective Mutism Resource Manual

The Royal Collage of Speech an Language Therapists

<https://www.rcslt.org/>

<https://www.selectivemutism.org/families-individuals/>

sma, Selective Mutism Association

<https://www.selectivemutism.org/families-individuals/>

Speech and Language Kids

<https://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/selective-mutism-treatment-a-guide-for-speech-therapists/>



### About Kate..

Kate is a Speech and Language Therapist and is the co-owner of Seaside SaLT (speech and language therapy), based in Scarborough which provides speech and language therapy services along the Yorkshire Coast.