Selective Mutism (SM)

Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder that prevents children and young people from speaking in certain social situations for example in school or in public. Children and young people who experience selective mutism may be able to speak freely to close family and friends when they feel comfortable or relaxed e.g. at home.

It is important to understand that children and young people who have selective mutism are not voluntarily refusing to speak – they are unable to speak in situations where they feel anxious.

Over time the child or young person will begin to anticipate the situations that provoke anxiety and avoid these as much as possible. Selective mutism often occurs in early childhood when the child starts to socialise outside the family home – however it can occur at any time and can continue into adolescence and adulthood. It can cause isolation and lead to other anxieties and mental health issues such as depression if left untreated. We have produced a separate article on anxiety which can be found here: http://www.portsmouthsendiass.info/images/c/c8/Anxiety-March_16.pdf

Is there a connection between Selective Mutism and Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC)?

It is often assumed that children or young people who have selective mutism also have an autism spectrum condition (ASC). However there is no connection between the two conditions – and children or young people with autism are not more likely to develop Selective Mutism. It is possible to have selective mutism alongside other conditions or disabilities such as ASC, generalised anxiety disorder.

Who is likely to develop Selective Mutism?

Whilst Selective Mutism is relatively rare (1 in 150 children) most primary schools will know of at least one child with the condition. Selective Mutism is more common in girls and children from ethnic minority communities.

What are the symptoms of Selective Mutism?

The symptoms of selective mutism can be similar to the symptoms of other social anxieties and speech and language issues. Some of these symptoms are listed in the table below:

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<th>Nervous</th>
<th>Uneasy and socially awkward</th>
<th>Clingy</th>
<th>Serious</th>
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Excessively shy and withdrawn, dreading that they will be expected to speak

Stubborn or aggressive, having temper tantrums when they get home from school

Frozen and expressionless during periods they cannot talk

Communicating using gestures e.g. nodding or shaking head to get their message across

Responding using an altered voice, such as a whisper

Fear of using public toilets – because others may hear them

It is unclear as to why some children or young people develop selective mutism. There is no evidence to suggest that children with selective mutism are more likely to have suffered abuse, neglect or trauma than any other child. When mutism occurs as a symptom of post-traumatic stress it follows a very different pattern and the child suddenly stops talking in environments where they previously had no difficulty.

With diagnosis and support children and young people can overcome selective mutism. However it needs to be recognised early by families and schools so that they can work together to help reduce the child’s anxiety.

**What is the difference between shyness and Selective Mutism?**

Children and young people who have selective mutism have a specific fear or anxiety around speaking or being heard. They will be sensitive to situations where there might be an expectation or pressure placed on them to talk. They will try to avoid these situations or their behaviour may noticeably change in these situations. They may suddenly shut down, back off, or become almost frozen and unable to respond. Some may be unable to communicate non-verbally e.g. making eye contact or nodding due to the level of their anxiety.

Shy children often feel unsure of themselves but generally will welcome support and help so that they can join in too.

This interesting article explains the difference between shyness and Selective mutism in more detail: [https://senmagazine.co.uk/articles/articles/senarticles/please-dont-be-quiet](https://senmagazine.co.uk/articles/articles/senarticles/please-dont-be-quiet)

**What should I do if I suspect my child or young person has Selective Mutism?**

If you suspect that your child or young person has selective mutism we would recommend visiting your GP in the first instance to discuss obtaining a diagnosis and the possibility of
Behavioural Therapy (BT) or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). You can also request that they refer you for Speech and Language Therapy.

**Solent NHS Trust’s Children’s Therapy Team** – which includes Speech and Language Therapy – support children and young people who have selective mutism. More information can be found at: [http://www.solent.nhs.uk/page-service.asp?fldArea=16&fldMenu=2&fldSubMenu=3&fldKey=728](http://www.solent.nhs.uk/page-service.asp?fldArea=16&fldMenu=2&fldSubMenu=3&fldKey=728). They also have an advice line which can be contacted on: **0300 300 2019**. This is an open referral service – which means that they accept referrals from schools/pre-schools, health professionals e.g. GP or Health Visitor or other professionals involved in your child or young person’s care. It is also possible to self-refer to this service.

If you would like to self-refer to this service – the referral pack can be downloaded from: [http://www.solent.nhs.uk/_store/documents/finalreferralpack.pdf](http://www.solent.nhs.uk/_store/documents/finalreferralpack.pdf) or can be requested via the helpline: **0300 300 2019**. Completed referral packs should be emailed to: **SNHS.SolentChildrensTherapyService@nhs.net** or sent to:

Children’s Therapy Service,

Single Point of Access,

Better Care Centre (Formerly The Orchard Centre),

William McLeod Way,

Southampton,

SO16 4XE

It is also possible to find a private/independent speech therapist who is able to support children or young people with Selective Mutism. The Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice – have a section on their website to help you with this: [http://www.helpwithtalking.com/Find-a--SLT](http://www.helpwithtalking.com/Find-a--SLT).

**Do you have any tips for managing my child’s/young person’s Selective Mutism?**

- It can be embarrassing if your child or young person refuses to speak in certain situations but try not to pressure them into speaking. It will only make them feel even more anxious and aware that they are not behaving in a way that is expected of them.
- Try not to bribe them in to speaking as again it will make them feel uncomfortable about their condition.
• Let your child know that you understand that they find speaking frightening or
difficult on occasions and that you are not embarrassed or upset when it occurs.
• If your child or young person is able to speak in a situation that they find difficult or
causes anxiety try not to make a big thing about it or praise them in public. This may
make them feel embarrassed or self-conscious about their condition. Make sure you
do give them some praise later in private though!
• Let your child/young person know that it is fine for them to use gestures e.g. waving
hand or nodding head until they are comfortable to speak in a situation. It is unlikely
that they will feel comfortable straightaway so make sure you give them plenty of
time and repeat visits to do this.
• Don’t avoid situations, events and occasions because of your child/young person’s
condition as this may make them feel more uncomfortable and awkward. Make sure
that appropriate people know about their condition and do not put pressure on your
child or young person to speak.
• Ask friends and relatives to give your child time to warm up at his or her own pace
and to focus on fun activities rather than getting them to talk.
• Be aware that their condition can lead to other anxiety disorders and isolation. If you
notice any changes in your child or young person’s behaviour ensure that you seek
further advice, information and support at the earliest opportunity if needed.

Resources:

• **SMiRA**: Selective Mutism Information and Research Association – are a registered
charity and not for profit organisation that offer advice, information and support on
Selective Mutism. They have a website which can be found at: [http://smira.org.uk/](http://smira.org.uk/). It offers a range of leaflets and information and also some good suggestions of resources to try with your child or young person. They have a facebook page which can be found at: [https://www.facebook.com/Smira-Selective-Mutism-Information-and-Research-Association-120663428027161/timeline/](https://www.facebook.com/Smira-Selective-Mutism-Information-and-Research-Association-120663428027161/timeline/). They also have a closed group: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/SMIRASelectiveMutism/?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/groups/SMIRASelectiveMutism/?fref=ts) you will need to request to join this group.
• **iSpeak**: is a Selective Mutism support group which is run by people who have the
condition. It can be found at: [http://www.ispeak.org.uk/Default.aspx](http://www.ispeak.org.uk/Default.aspx). This contains links to resources such as videos and articles.
• **NHS Choices**: have a good section on their website on Selective Mutism:
• **GOSH**: have a section on their website about Selective Mutism – which can be found at: [http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information-0/search-medical-conditions/selective-mutism](http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information-0/search-medical-conditions/selective-mutism). This includes a downloadable resource sheet: [http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/file/1533/download?token=t0aoflpT](http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/file/1533/download?token=t0aoflpT).
• **Anxiety UK**: have a small section on their website about Selective Mutism:

• There have been a number of books published on the subject of Selective Mutism. The following books are for children and young people who may be experiencing Selective Mutism and their friends:
  
  o *Lola's words disappeared* by Elaheh Bos. ISBN: 484043332. More information can be found at: [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lolas-words-disappeared-Elaheh-Bos/dp/1484043332/ref=pd_sim_14_18?ie=UTF8&dpID=61Tm5YyrFhL&dpSrc=sims&preST=_AC_UL160_SR160%2C160_&refRID=16B7BHT8JNEGVP4GMF5M](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lolas-words-disappeared-Elaheh-Bos/dp/1484043332/ref=pd_sim_14_18?ie=UTF8&dpID=61Tm5YyrFhL&dpSrc=sims&preST=_AC_UL160_SR160%2C160_&refRID=16B7BHT8JNEGVP4GMF5M). There is also an accompanying activity book – click here for more information: [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lolas-words-disappeared-came-back/dp/148267498X/ref=pd_bxgy_14_2?ie=UTF8&refRID=1AHQS96ME0NZDC6JCGQB](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lolas-words-disappeared-came-back/dp/148267498X/ref=pd_bxgy_14_2?ie=UTF8&refRID=1AHQS96ME0NZDC6JCGQB).
  
  
  

• The following books are guides for parents, professionals and other people who may be in contact with your child:
  
  o *Selective Mutism In Our Own Words* by Carl Sutton and Cheryl Foster. ISBN: 1849056366. For more information visit: [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Selective-Mutism-In-Our-Words/dp/1849056366/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1456742170&sr=8-1&keywords=Selective+Mutism](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Selective-Mutism-In-Our-Words/dp/1849056366/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1456742170&sr=8-1&keywords=Selective+Mutism).
  
For more information visit: [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tell-About-Selective-Mutism-Professionals/dp/1849052891/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&dpID=41qLtxwHXdl&dpSrc=sims&preST=_AC_UL160_SR107%2C160_&refRID=1ZQ5E7E484R69KF2A9V1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tell-About-Selective-Mutism-Professionals/dp/1849052891/ref=pd_sim_14_1?ie=UTF8&dpID=41qLtxwHXdl&dpSrc=sims&preST=_AC_UL160_SR107%2C160_&refRID=1ZQ5E7E484R69KF2A9V1).


- **Support Selective Mutism** have a facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Support-Selective-Mutism/167708556616831](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Support-Selective-Mutism/167708556616831) and Twitter account: @SupportSM

- There is also a public **SM Awareness** group on Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/smawareness/?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/groups/smawareness/?fref=ts)

### Organisations:

- **SMiRA**: Selective Mutism Information and Research Association – are a registered charity and not for profit organisation. They have a contact form which is located at the bottom of their webpages: [http://smira.org.uk/resources/](http://smira.org.uk/resources/). They do not have a helpline or separate email address.

- **Anxiety UK**: have a website: [https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/](https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/) and information line which can be contacted by calling: **0844 775 774** (Monday – Friday 9:30am - 5.30pm) or emailing: **support@anxietyuk.org.uk**.
- **iSpeak**: do not have a telephone helpline – but they do have an on-line contact form which can be found at: [http://www.ispeak.org.uk/ContactForm.aspx](http://www.ispeak.org.uk/ContactForm.aspx). They are unable to offer emotional support – just practical advice and information on Selective Mutism.