



Supporting Reluctant Speakers - Children with Selective Mutism

Information for parents/carers



What is it?

Children with Selective Mutism speak freely to only a small number of people with whom they feel comfortable. This is usually with their family and usually in the family home. Commonly they have most difficulty speaking in nursery or in school.

Reluctant Speakers will talk a little in certain situations and can be regarded as having a mild form of Selective Mutism.



Why is it difficult for your child to speak freely?

Selective Mutism and Reluctant Speaking are caused by anxiety about talking in social situations. It is important to remember that your child wants to talk, but anxiety prevents them from doing so.

Many factors may be involved in the development of Selective Mutism, and these will differ for each child.

However, they may include: family history of shyness or Selective Mutism, loss or trauma, teasing, separation or self-awareness of speech impairment.

What can you do?

- It is helpful to think of Selective Mutism as the result of anxiety about speaking, rather than your child being defiant.
- Let your child know that you know that they find it difficult to speak to less familiar adults or in less familiar places.
- Encourage non-verbal interactions with less familiar people, eg waving instead of saying hello, smiling, nodding, making eye contact.
- Try not to feel worried if your child will not respond to someone. Acknowledge that your child finds it hard to speak to people they don't know well.
- Reward all efforts to communicate no matter how small.
- If your child whispers to you in front of less familiar people, praise their effort.
- Once your child feels more confident about speaking in a louder voice, you might be able to move a short distance away from your child in the same situation on a following occasion.
- Encourage your child to take a toy to the park which may help interaction with other children even if your child still feels anxious about speaking to them.
- Offer your child a prompt or help structure a situation if they look unsure. Help them join in even and play by bridging them into a group or to another child, eg you might say "Look they want you to join them".

Things which don't help

- Pressurising in any way your child to speak.
- Withholding a reward for not speaking. They wish to speak but cannot.
- Giving your child too much attention for either not speaking or for speaking. They are probably self conscious and may feel uncomfortable with too much attention until they feel more confident.
- Using negative labels within your child's ear-shot: for instance telling a visitor "She's the quiet one". Try to discourage other children from using these labels.

Getting help

- Both Selective Mutism and Reluctant Speaking can be successfully overcome.
- If your child or young person is not speaking in pre-school or school for at least eight weeks, the school or pre-school will have considered what they can do to help. If your child's reluctance to speak continues, staff will be keen to meet with you to work out ways which everyone agrees will support your child.
- Information about helpful approaches is included in this document under the heading "**What can you do?**"
- Further information is provided to schools and pre-schools by their Local Authority and there are also NHS guidelines available.