

# Selective Mutism

Selective mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder in which a child who speaks regularly at home consistently fails to speak in other settings (such as at school). Selective mutism is usually first recognized when a child enters school, but it can be detected much earlier. Most children with SM have normal speech and language abilities; therefore, it is most accurately classified as a form of social anxiety.

**Approximately 1% of children ages 4 to 7 meet criteria for SM, but the disorder remains underdiagnosed.**

## How does selective mutism become problematic?

**Interference:** Selective mutism often interferes with academic performance. These children have difficulty speaking with teachers and classmates, asking questions, and doing class presentations.

**Impairment:** Children with SM often are not able to speak with anyone outside of their immediate family. This impacts their ability to make friends, converse with relatives, and participate in day-to-day conversations.

**Distress:** If the child is experiencing significant anxiety about speaking to people outside of their immediate family, it negatively impacts the well-being of the child and prevents them from engaging in age-appropriate activities.

## What can parents do to help?

### ***Don't speak for the child.***

While it is tempting to fill awkward silences, it is better to allow the child an opportunity to speak for themselves and reinforce this expectation.

### ***Create safe spaces to practice speaking.***

Start with having the child speak to a parent in front of a close family member or friend, then progress to different people and situations with increasing unfamiliarity.

### ***Set up situations that are likely to lead to success.***

Invite a friend over to play a board game in which speaking is minimal.

## How is selective mutism treated?


Selective mutism is treated through a combination of behavioral techniques that encourage gradual increases in speaking in situations that are difficult for the child. The child practices speaking-related behaviors (e.g., mouthing speech, whispering, etc.) of increasing difficulty until they are ready to practice speaking to different individuals, and in different contexts and situations. Given that SM appears in contexts outside of the home, it is important that treatment integrates the mental health professional, the parents, the child, and school personnel. The parents and school personnel learn how to best support the child by providing opportunities for practice and through treatment, the child receives reinforcement for speaking in these situations.



For more information, resources, and advice, visit

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