



AN ANXIETY-BASED CONDITION

Selective Mutism

Selective mutism is an anxiety-based condition in which a child (or adult) is consistently unable to speak in certain situations, such as school, despite speaking comfortably in others, such as home. It is an inability driven by anxiety, not a choice.

i This is **not** shyness, defiance or a deliberate choice, and not usually caused by trauma – it is an anxiety disorder. The person *wants* to speak but cannot in situations that trigger their anxiety. The key sign is consistency: they speak freely where they feel safe.

How it can present

- Freezing or being unable to speak in certain settings (e.g. school)
- Speaking freely and comfortably at home or with close family
- Using gestures, nods, pointing or writing instead
- Appearing frozen, still or blank when expected to talk
- Physical signs of anxiety; avoiding eye contact
- Sometimes difficulty eating in front of others or answering the register

What helps – supportive approaches

- ✓ Reduce the pressure to speak – remove the expectation rather than coaxing
- ✓ A calm, low-anxiety, predictable environment
- ✓ Build confidence gradually in small steps (e.g. 'sliding-in')
- ✓ Welcome non-verbal participation (nodding, pointing, writing)
- ✓ Never bribe, force, surprise or publicly praise into speaking
- ✓ Close home-school-SALT collaboration; warm, patient relationships

UK CONTEXT

~1 in 140

About 1 in 140 young children (under 1%) experience selective mutism. It is more common in girls and in children learning an additional language.

NHS / SMIRA / RCSLT

Strengths often seen

- + Often highly observant and perceptive
- + Sensitive, thoughtful and empathetic
- + Conscientious and careful
- + Articulate and capable when relaxed and comfortable
- + Good listeners

Finding assessment & support in the UK

- 1 Talk to the school SENCo
- 2 Speak to your GP or health visitor for advice and referral
- 3 NHS Speech and Language Therapy and/or CAMHS
- 4 School SEN Support; request an EHC needs assessment / EHCP where needs are greater
- 5 SMIRA offers information, resources and support

Please note – this sheet provides general information only. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for individual assessment or professional advice. Every person is unique; if you have concerns about yourself or a child, please speak with a suitably qualified professional.

Sources & further information: NHS · SMIRA · RCSLT · Anxiety UK