

Selective Mutism

Selective mutism (SM) is an anxiety-based disorder that affects a child's ability to speak to specific people, in specific environments despite being able to talk freely in settings where they feel more comfortable e.g. at home with their family. For some children, they are able to use non-verbal communication to get their message across in these situations such as nodding, pointing, using their fingers to express numbers/choices etc. For others, they may be literally 'frozen' in their anxiety and unable to respond in this way.

SM is NOT choice

It is important to remember that the young person does not CHOOSE to remain silent, their anxiety prevents them from being able to speak, even if they desperately want to. It is not personal. They need your help to build their confidence and trust.

How can I help?

- Do not put any pressure on the young person to talk. Take time to get to know the child, without any expectation of talking.
- Engage in activities with them on a 1:1/small group basis and give them a range of options for how they can join in, without needing to talk.
- Comment on activities rather than use direct questions to reduce the expectation of a response.
- Accept any form of communication they are able to use e.g. pointing, nodding, gestures, talking to you through a friend etc.
- Provide them with alternative means to communicate wherever possible e.g. access to pen/paper if they feel able to respond in writing.
- Respond to any form of communication naturally as if they had spoken to you.
- If they do speak, DO NOT make a big deal of this. Just respond naturally to what they have said and have your celebration of their success later in private.
- Do not draw attention to the young person. Give them opportunities to participate in activities but do not pick on them to respond to something or make a 'big deal' of something they have done well in front of others. Putting the spotlight on them (even if this is positive) can increase anxiety.
- Young people with SM may need 'permission' to do things that others would take for granted e.g. collect something from another part of the room, leave a room, go to the toilet. Make sure to remind them 'It's OK to....' so they know they have permission and access to resources they may need.
- Make sure the young person has a way to access the toilet and first aid if they need to. It might be useful to agree with the young person/parents how they feel able to do this.
- Partner the young person with familiar peers to help them build their confidence and encourage them to 'show' others how to do things when appropriate.

If you require further support in relation to a child/young person with SM, please contact us on **0300 123 3444** or email: medch.childrenscommunity@nhs.net.

