

When a Child Can Talk but Does Not Speak in Some Situations

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Understanding Selective Mutism

What is Selective Mutism?

Some children talk easily at home but cannot speak in other places, such as school or around unfamiliar people.



This is called selective mutism. It is an anxiety condition, not a behaviour problem. The child is not choosing to stay silent. They feel too anxious to speak in those situations, even if they want to.



This difficulty:

- Happens regularly in certain settings
- Lasts at least one month (not including the first month in a new place)

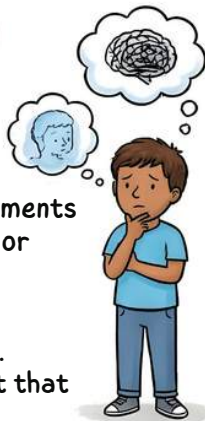
Why does it happen?

Selective mutism is linked to anxiety, especially in social situations.

Your child may:

- Feel overwhelmed in certain environments
- Worry about speaking, being heard or being noticed
- Be afraid of getting things wrong

Their body reacts as if there is danger. Speaking can feel extremely difficult at that moment.



Simple things you can try

- Ask yes or no questions instead of open questions
- Offer simple choices, for example "apple or banana?"
- Give extra time for your child to respond
- Arrange calm, one-to-one time with another child
- Visit new places when they are quiet and less busy
- Build confidence slowly, step by step



What might you notice?

Your child may:

- Talk normally at home but say nothing at school or outside
- Speak only to certain people or whisper
- Become still, tense or avoid eye contact when expected to speak
- Nod, point or use gestures instead of words
- Struggle to join in activities that involve talking



This can affect learning, friendships and confidence.

What helps?

Children need to feel safe, understood and not under pressure.

Helpful approaches:

- Give your child time. Do not rush them to speak
- Accept other ways of communicating, such as nodding or pointing
- Keep your tone calm and your expectations realistic
- Prepare your child for new situations in advance
- Encourage small steps over time, without pressure
- Work together with school or nursery staff



Try to avoid:

- Saying "just talk" or repeating questions
- Drawing attention to the child not speaking
- Showing frustration or embarrassment
- Speaking for the child in every situation



When to get help

Seek support if:

- Your child does not speak in certain settings for at least one month (not including the first month somewhere new)
- It is affecting their learning, friendships or daily life



Key message

Children with selective mutism want to speak but feel unable to. With patience, understanding and the right support, they can gradually build confidence and speak in more situations.



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