

Selective Mutism

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder in which a person is unable to speak in certain social situations such as school or public places but can speak comfortably in other situations. Selective mutism significantly impairs functioning in everyday life and in school, work and social settings.

Signs & Symptoms

A child with selective mutism experiences anxiety with speaking, and sometimes may also be unable to make eye contact, nod their head, point or make other nonverbal forms of communication when in a social situation. A child with selective mutism might:

- Speak comfortably at home or with people they trust
- Be fearful or anxious around people they do not know well
- Come off as shy or withdrawn
- Appear nervous, uneasy, or socially awkward
- Be clingy to people they are familiar with

Causes & Risk Factors

The exact cause of selective mutism is unknown, but it may be caused by a combination of genetic, environmental, and neurodevelopmental factors. Most children who have selective mutism have been reported as behaviorally shy since infancy. Risk factors for developing selective mutism include but are not limited to:

- An existing speech and language disorder, or hearing issue
- Close blood relative who has an anxiety disorder or selective mutism
- A stressful environment

Diagnosis & Treatment

A pediatrician or mental health professional can diagnose an individual with selective mutism by assessing their level of impairment in everyday activities, silence in social settings is present for at least one month or longer than six months in their first year of school, and the silence is not caused by another disorder. Treatment plans commonly consist of therapy with psychologists, speech language pathologists, behavior analysts, and counselors. Treatment does not primarily focus on the speaking itself, but rather on reducing anxiety associated with speaking in certain situations. Medication is not commonly prescribed unless the anxiety around speaking has led to depression or other problems.

Source – *Selectivemutism.org*: <https://www.selectivemutism.org/involving-a-speech-therapist-in-your-childs-treatment> and *National Institute of Health*: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2861522/>