

About Selective Mutism (SM)

Selective Mutism (SM) is a condition that is **driven by anxiety**, as acknowledged in the DSM-5. It is a condition that is neither a choice, nor a behaviour. The anxiety increases in **select settings or around select people**, triggering the Fight, Flight and Freeze response. When triggered, the SM sufferer Freezes, becoming stone-faced, unable to make eye-contact, and can even lose temporary hearing so they may miss instructions. **The anxiety causes the SM sufferer's vocal chords actually paralyse, making it impossible for them to talk until their anxiety is reduced.**

The sufferer of SM **wants** to talk, but **can't**. The longer SM goes un-noticed and un-supported, the more entrenched it usually becomes, and the sufferer often learns avoidance behaviours as a strategy to reduce their own anxiety. Most of the time, the sufferers themselves **do not understand why they are unable to talk**. They can feel trapped in their silence and often feel **misunderstood, confused and troubled**.

SM occurs when the **sufferer's anxiety levels are high**, normally outside the home environment. Parents are most often the last people to realise there is an issue with their child, because at home sufferers of SM can be chatty, fun and confident people. SM is *selective*, meaning it all **depends upon the sufferer's anxiety levels on a given day in a given situation**.

SM is a condition that can wave up and down, for example, what the sufferer may be able to do on Monday they may not be able to repeat on Tuesday. **Eye-contact is very difficult for SM sufferers to maintain**, in fact if you talk to a sufferer whilst limiting eye contact, even with your back turned, you are probably more likely to get a response!

People with SM **can struggle with non verbal communication** as well as verbal! Often sufferers of SM are **perfectionists**, and also suffer from **Sensory Processing Disorder** which seems to magnify under the increased anxiety. A sufferer of SM may find it just as difficult to hold up a card, their hand, make non verbal gestures, even writing and drawing as they do talking.

It is important to note that the **pleasantries are often the hardest words for SM sufferers to say!** Please, Thank you, Yes, No, Good-Morning, Good-bye etc, are all expected words, and **expectations can create anxiety**. The key here is **to take all pressure off the sufferer to speak**.

Working with Selective Mutism

I recommend the very first thing you do is to squat down to the child's level and tell him/her that **you understand** he/she finds it hard to talk sometimes, and that he/she **doesn't have to talk** until he/she is comfortable and ready. Doing this will gain you the sufferer's trust and allow you to build a solid relationship and platform to work from.

It would be beneficial to also ask other adults he/she comes into contact with in the day **to do the same thing**. It is paramount he/she **feels no pressure, and feels supported and understood**. Make sure every adult, teacher and carer in the school is aware of this child's condition. Also, not drawing attention to them around the other children is important. **Unwanted attention and pressure can cause SM to become more entrenched.**

If the sufferer does not receive the support they need, they can develop other conditions such as depression, and sometimes a condition called Progressive Mutism (PM). Progressive Mutism is a condition where the sufferer becomes unable to speak in **all situations** - even at home.

Never try to bribe or use a reward system to encourage speech, as this has been proven ineffective and actually causes the sufferer to **regress into their SM** as it places pressure on the sufferer's shoulders to speak. However, always give the sufferer the **opportunity to speak**. If you ask a question, make it a choice question rather than a direct question, and wait as long as you need to for an answer. If after, say, 30 seconds you don't get an answer, distract and move on without making a big deal of it.

Make sure other adults in the child's life know to do the same thing, and that the **child is always included**. Sufferers of SM are usually very intelligent. They may not be able to talk at certain times, but they can **understand everything and desire to belong and to be a part of the class**. Sufferers of SM are often worried about letting others down, or making mistakes. Reassurance that they are doing a great job, and that one day they will talk is key and makes a big difference to their progress.

Always keep **good, open communication between teachers, parents and any support people**. Meltdowns after school are a huge indication that something isn't working, and it's often the behaviour the SM child expresses at home. This is because they have spent their day unable to express much of what has been going on for them, and it is important for their pent up emotions to be given an outlet.

The Sliding In Technique

One of the best and most proven steps forward is what is called “**The Sliding in Technique.**” This is a technique based upon **gradual exposure**. Ideally you will need to spend a minimum of a few hours a few times a week with this child, sliding him/her into the classroom and school environment.

Helping the sufferer overcome their SM can be a slow process, and can sometimes take years, so **patience and consistency is key**.

Valerie Marshall, who is a member of the NZSM Facebook support room runs Ouvrir La Voix, a charity in France. She has developed a successful sliding in guide for parents and teachers to implement, and can provide a translated copy if you would like. Please email voice@selectivemutism.org.nz to request this.

It is often a good idea to **work with the parent**, or someone the sufferer can speak to. Integrate the parent into the sliding in treatment plan and **build up slowly**, introducing the teacher and other class mates, **following the sufferers cue**. It is beneficial if the parent also takes these strategies into the wider environment, and perhaps encourages **one on one playdates** with fellow classmates.

It can be very valuable for the sufferer to **arrive to school ten minutes early**, so they can feel comfortable and not have eyes all on them when they walk through the door. The class therefore slowly builds up in numbers rather than a crowd all at once. It might also help if the child can play for 10 minutes in the playground at the end of school.

At VOICE, our philosophy is to **take the pressure off the voice, reduce the anxiety, build the trust, and gradually start to ease the sufferer into more speaking situations**. Once the anxiety is lowered, the voice can emerge. Please remember that no two sufferers of SM are the same. What one sufferer maybe able to do, another may not. It all depends on their anxiety triggers and levels.

This information has been compiled by VOICE for Selective Mutism to inform support people of SM sufferers about what selective mutism is, and to give some direction in working with SM.