



Addressing Selective Mutism in the Preschool Child

Selective mutism is a complex childhood disorder characterized by a child's inability to speak in select social settings such as school. These children are able to talk normally in settings where they are comfortable, secure, and relaxed. Children with selective mutism have an actual fear of speaking and of social interactions where there is an expectation to talk.

For Teachers: How Can I Help?

- Establish rapport with the child so they feel comfortable with you.
- Accept all attempts at communication even if they are non-verbal. Do not pressure, punish, or coerce the student to talk, remember this will only elevate his/her anxiety.
- Engage with the child in something they are interested in. Language usually appears when the child is motivated by something they want or need. "Forcing" the child to talk will only create more anxiety.
- Start with one-on-one interactions, and then move on to small groups of 1 or 2 other peers. Do not call on the child in circle time or put them on the spot in front of peers.
- Once you feel they are ready, ask open-ended questions (e.g., "Where would you like to play?"). If the child points or gestures, then you can model for them (e.g., "Oh, outside.").
- Make sure to give the child time to respond when asking them questions.
- Be empathetic and acknowledge the student for their efforts to participate during communicative and social interactions.

For Parents: How Can I Help?

- Gently encourage your child to speak in public settings.
- Talk to your child in the classroom when you pick them up from school. Ask them to show you a toy they like or engage them in conversation within the classroom environment.
- Gradually involve the teacher in your conversations during pick-up time.
- Do not force or pressure your child to talk in high-anxiety situations – encourage them to participate gradually.
- Be empathetic and acknowledge them for their efforts to participate during communicative and social interactions in situations that are difficult for them.