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## **Advice Around Toileting in School and Selective Mutism**

### **What is Selective Mutism?**

Selective Mutism, or SM as it is commonly known, is an anxiety disorder where an individual who can speak freely at home and other “safe situations” in which they feel comfortable, is then unable to speak in other situations. This is often due to anxiety and the body going into a “freeze” response. It can affect people of any age and many of these people want to be able to speak and often know *what* they want to say but the words just won't come out.

Some people with SM are able to speak more than others. This is called Low Profile SM, and it can be harder to realise there is a difficulty, but often, the underlying anxieties are just as bad.

### **SM & Toileting**

Many children and young people (YP) with SM experience difficulties around toileting, especially in school and public places. There are several reasons for this, with these probably being the most common:

- In many classes, children are expected to **ask** to go to the toilet, so that staff can keep track of where their pupils are. However, this is extremely hard, often impossible for those with SM, because not only is there an expectation to speak, but also to initiate that interaction. Even symbols and/or gestures can be hard, as SM can affect ALL forms of communication. Therefore, even trying Makaton or a symbol card may not be the answer.
- Many children and YP with SM are affected by too much sensory stimulation in toilets, especially the smells and loud noises. Both of which can be a problem in the vicinity of the toilets. Toilets can be very echoey and if there are hand dryers, this often makes things worse. By the nature of what they are, toilets (especially those in schools) can also be very smelly places and many children who are highly sensitive will struggle to cope with this, even if **we** don't think they're too bad. (see link below to ERIC website & toilet anxiety).
- Some children and YP with SM are also very conscious of any noise they make whilst toileting and don't want anyone else to hear them.
- When someone is anxious, their muscles tend to tense up and so if a child is tense whilst toileting, the muscles in their bladder and urinary tract tense up and can't relax to let urine flow.

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*Selective Mutism Support in Hampshire & Dorset*

If a child with SM finds it hard to access the toilet they may:

- have repeated soiling and wetting accidents in class, which can lead to upset and humiliation
- hold on which risks them developing Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) and constipation
- limit their intake of drinks, which can cause constipation and dehydration which is likely to impact their learning.

## **Recommendations**

Each child is different, so some things may work for one but not others.

- Younger children will need adults to take responsibility for taking them to the toilet regularly and supporting them if needed.
- Allow children, especially those with SM, to go to the toilet without asking.
- If it helps, allow children to access the toilets with a friend.
- If a child is worried about others hearing them in the toilet, allow them to go when everyone else has finished and left the area.
- Use a whole class system to show who is at the toilet, rather than singling out those with SM.
- Allow a child or YP to use a toilet that they are comfortable using, even if this is a staff toilet or accessible toilet.
- Ask the parents to have a conversation at home with the child or YP to find out what they think would work for them.

## **Thoughts for Parents**

Are there any toileting routines at home which make it harder to transfer to school?

Are children used to leaving the toilet door open at home?

Are they dependent on an adult at home for some aspects of toileting?

Can they express to you why they do not like using toilets at school?

Can they say what they think would work for them in school and make toileting easier?

## **Further information**

ERIC (Education & Resources For Improving Childhood Continence) website:

<https://eric.org.uk/information/school-toilet-policy/>

<https://eric.org.uk/information/toilet-anxiety/>

Selective Mutism Resource Manual by Maggie Johnson & Alison Wintgens

Selective Mutism Workbook by Maggie Johnson & Junhua Reitman

If you would like personalised advice and support, please feel free to contact me via any of the methods shown at the bottom of the front page.

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