

Selective Mutism Advice

for Sports Coaches & Other Extra-Curricular Providers

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. 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.

Children with SM often find it hard to pursue hobbies and interests because of the expectations to talk, but that shouldn’t prevent them from being accepted and being able to have a go. Many children with SM are creative and enjoy activities such as dance, drama and sport. They just need the right adults around to support and encourage them.

How you can help someone with SM

- With SM, relationships are key. Therefore, it is important to make these as positive as possible both with peers and adults.
- Some children with SM may need time to acclimatise to a new group or setting and may appreciate a parent/carer staying with them for a few sessions. They may also just want to watch before taking part.
- Each person is different so it is important to ask them (or parents) how you can make their inclusion easier.
- Find out their preferred method of communication. This may be using gestures (nodding, thumbs up/down), pictorial symbols (usually on small cards that can be kept in a pocket) or written communication (notebook, text, instant messaging, email).
- Someone with SM usually wants to be treated the same way as everyone else. Include them in conversations and give them opportunities to interact in non-verbal ways.
- Learn to interpret their body language as this can tell you a lot about how they are feeling.
- Never pressurise someone to speak or insist on eye contact as this will only make their anxiety worse.
- People with SM often don’t want to be singled out as *different*, and therefore it can be helpful to have inclusive systems in place for everyone, such as an interactive register rather than answering a name call.

- People with SM usually have no problem with hearing or understanding. Therefore, you don't need to simplify explanations any more than you would for their peers, but, because they can't say they don't understand, don't assume that they do: always check with them.
- Humour is often a good way to interact with children with SM, but not in a way that is over the top or patronising!
- Children with SM are often highly sensitive even if comments are not directed at them, and will pick up on negativity.
- Communication is often easier in a 1:1 conversation rather than a group.
- Ask the parents for regular feedback as to how things are going. Their child will be able to speak to them at home and they can then relay information to you.
- Always take things at the child's communication pace, not what you would like. It's not a race or challenge. Some children may begin to feel more comfortable quite quickly and others may take longer. Some may never be able to speak to you, but remember they are with you to learn a sport or activity, and enjoy being part of a club, not necessarily to chat.
- Be extra vigilant of peer to peer interactions and watch out for any signs of possible bullying or exclusion.

Steps to Easier Communication

- Start by introducing yourself and let the person know that you understand they find it hard to speak sometimes, but that's OK with you and you look forward to hearing their voice when they are ready. If other children comment and ask why X doesn't speak, tell them they can speak, and when they are comfortable, they will do so.
- Start with a commentary style conversation where you are talking about what is happening and asking "I wonder...." hypothetical questions (e.g. "I wonder if you can kick that ball into the goal").
- Use closed questions that only need Yes/No answers so the child can respond with gestures.
- When they are more comfortable, begin to use questions that need other one-word answers. If the child is unable to answer, rephrase it to enable a Yes/No response.
- If a child verbalises at some point, don't draw attention to it, just carry on as if it is the most normal thing in the world! However, also don't assume it will necessarily happen again.
- If a child struggles with responding to something you have said or asked, just rephrase it in a way that is easier to reply.

Parents' Comments Personal to Their Child: