

Effective Strategies for Supporting Children with Selective Mutism: Treatment Planning for Home and School

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Welcome!

Goals for today:

- What is selective mutism?
 - Symptoms, common characteristics, myth busting, and the importance of early intervention
- Strategies and practical tools to encourage kids to find their “brave voice”
- Understanding school supports
 - Special education
 - What can teachers, special educators, and parents do to support students at school
- Parent roles in supporting their kids in the community and home

Audience Poll...

- School professionals?
- Therapists?
- Parents?
- Students?
- Have you worked with a student with selective mutism?
- On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with selective mutism?
 - (1- no familiarity, 5- extremely familiar)

What is selective mutism?

- Social communication anxiety disorder
- Child is completely comfortable speaking in some settings with some people (such as at home)
- In other settings with other people, child is silent or extremely inhibited.
- This persists for at least one month period of exposure to particular settings and people
- Interferes significantly with social, educational and/or emotional functioning
- Failure to speak is not due to lack of knowledge or comfort with spoken language
- Symptoms are first seen in early childhood

“Situational Mutism”

- Some are beginning to adopt the term “situational mutism” as this may put less emphasis on the individual making the “choice” not to speak
- In this presentation, we will use the term “selective mutism”, as this is what is officially recognized in the DSM V
- “Selective” means it is happening in select situations, NOT that a child is selecting (choosing) not to speak

Common characteristics of kids with selective mutism

- 1 per 140 children
- More common in girls
- Perfectionistic
- Kids often don't want to call attention to themselves. "Fly under the radar"
- Another anxiety disorder is common
 - Social phobia is #1 comorbidity
- 50% or more of kids with SM also have some form of language deficit
- Up to 75% of children with SM also have a parent with social phobia

What does this look like at school?

A child who...

- May be academically at or above grade level
- Needs help in class, but remains frozen because they can't raise their hand to ask, and may miss entire sections of the lesson
- Won't eat lunch or go to the bathroom at school (some may have an accident)
- Can't complete classwork such as group discussions or presentations
- Is hurt (sometimes seriously) but can't tell someone
- Struggles to make new friends
- Has friends, but does not speak to any of them (most common among younger students)
- Participates almost exclusively with non-verbal communication (pointing, nodding, etc.)
- Deer-in-the-headlights, flat affect, avoiding eye contact

Parents will say that their child speaks completely normally at home, sometimes describing them as “chatterboxes”

Myth-Busting

- Trauma does not cause selective mutism
- Silence is not defiance but rather an avoidance behavior meant to escape fear.
- Parents do not cause selective mutism but answering for the child can reinforce avoidance.
- Not all children with SM are afraid of talking to adults. Some are just afraid to talk to peers, while some talk to strangers easily, but not to people they know.
- Selective mutism is not the same thing as autism although they can co-occur.
- Parents cannot force their children to speak, however there is plenty that parents can do to encourage their child to speak.
- Some people with a more moderate condition may whisper, or may only talk when asked questions and rarely initiate.
- Usually, people do not outgrow SM. They may be able to get by using written communication, minimal talking, or whispering.
 - However, they may miss key developmental, social, and academic milestones

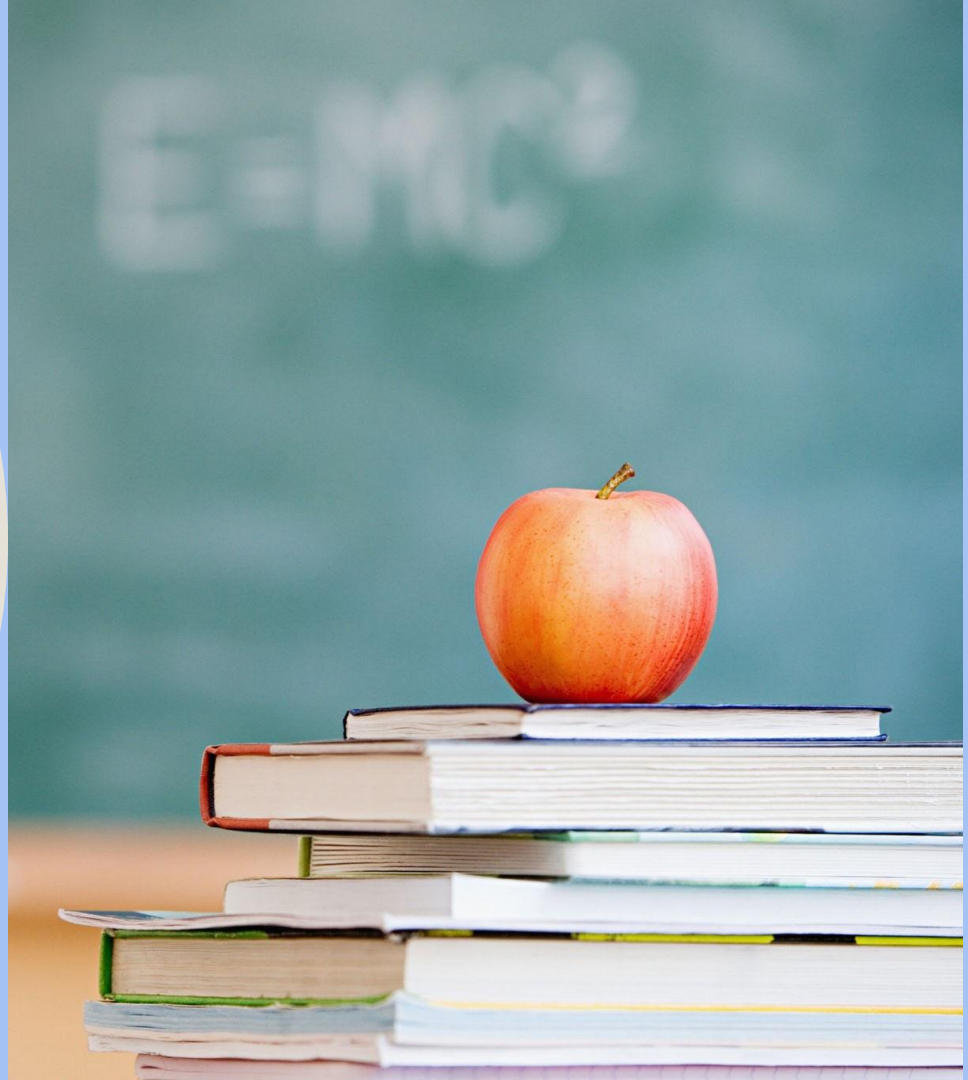
“Gateway disorder”

If left untreated, selective mutism in childhood puts kids at higher risk for...

- Other anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Social isolation
- School refusal
- Self-harm
- Substance abuse
- Lower academic and vocational achievement

The good news...

Selective mutism is treatable! Early intervention at school and in the community helps put kids on a better trajectory.

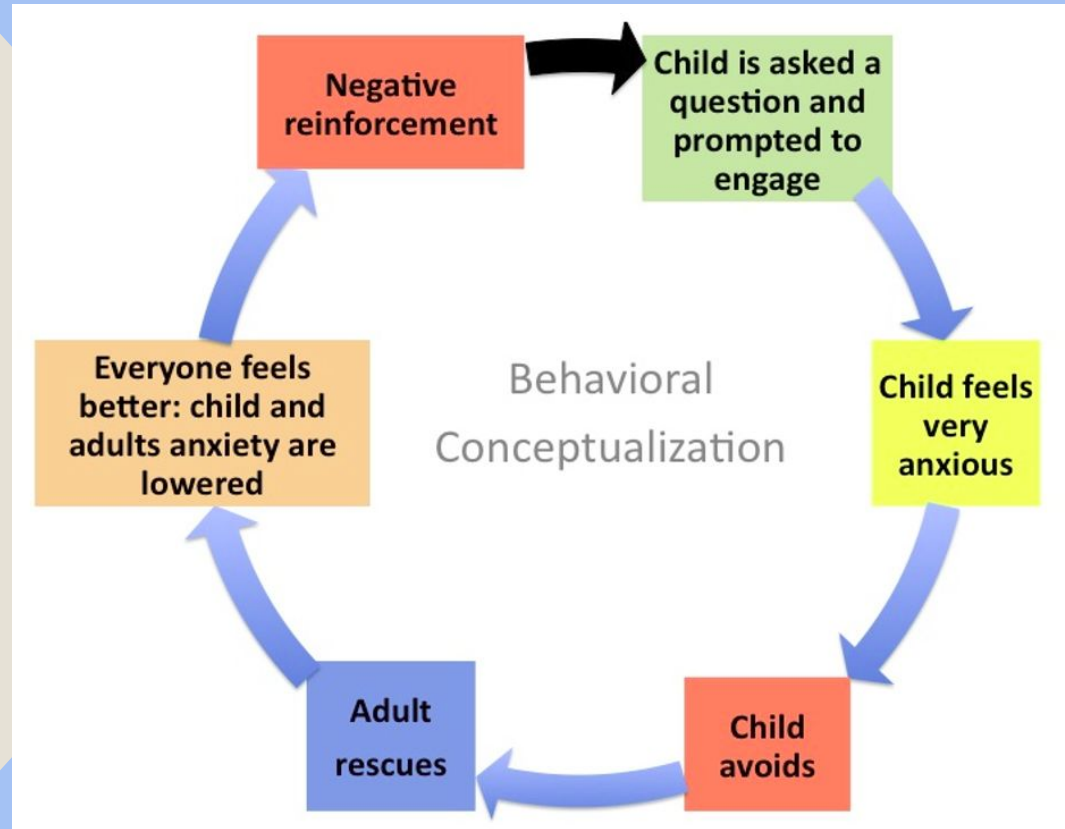


Strategies to help kids with selective mutism

Approaches that help

- Helping kids face their fears of talking in a fun, trusting relationship
- Distress tolerance... get comfortable being uncomfortable!
- Small, successive steps to being brave
- Skill building for all adults involved
- Team approach (all parents, caregivers, teachers, school staff must be involved and using the same skills)
- Family committing to an “exposure lifestyle”
- Changing one thing at a time
 - Change only the person, location, or activity related to speaking
- SSRI medication, if needed

The problem we're up against:



Contamination

- Words, people, places, situations
- Highly contaminated locations or people (ex: school, the teacher they never talk to, etc.) is not where we start!
- If possible, start with people with no “contamination history”
- One of the hardest places to work on phobia is in the classroom, best to start somewhere else
- #1 cause of contamination= unanswered questions

Climbing the Brave Talking Ladder

- Talking about “hard” emotions (anxious, sad, mad)
- Talking about “easy” emotions (happy, excited, silly)
- Approaching a peer and asking to play
- Saying hello, goodbye, please, thank you
- Asking for help/ I don’t understand
- Talking in front of a group
- Saying your name and others’ name
- Asking someone else a question
- Answering opinion-based questions
- Answering open-ended questions
- VDI (Forced-Choice questions)
- CDI (Sports Casting/ PRIDE talk)



CDI

Child Directed Interaction

- PCIT-SM (Parent Child Interaction Therapy for Selective Mutism)
- Dr. Steven Kurtz
- Sportscasting -Describe what the child is doing. Child gets used to being noticed and talked at
- Desensitizes the child
- Home base - where we start and return
- Lowest rung of the brave talking ladder
- Initially, most adults at school should be using CDI, unless they are expressly working on establishing speech with the child

CDI Do's and Don'ts

(Dr. Steven Kurtz, Selective Mutism University course)

DO	DON'T
Labeled Praise	Mind Read
Reflect Verbalizations	Questions
Behavior Descriptions (like a play-by-play announcer or sportscaster)	Commands to Talk or do anything
Find ways around asking questions. Speak in statements instead.	Negative comments, especially about if they are talking or not
Play to Strengths	"Hello", "Goodbye", "Please", "Thank you"

PRIDE Skills

- **Praise:** Labeled, specific praise. Don't say "good job." Instead say, "Thank you for telling me you are drawing a castle," "Wow, I like how you are using so many colors," or "Great job building those blocks so high!"
- **Reflections:** Say aloud what child says. "You said, 'It's a house.'" Also reflect the noises that the child makes. "Beep beep", "Woo woo", laughter.
- **Imitation:** Do what the child is doing. Follow their lead in play. No commands to do anything in particular.
- **Describe:** Describe what you and the child are doing. "You are stacking the red block on top of a yellow block," or "I'm going to draw a picture of the sun."
- **Excitement:** Show enjoyment & excitement. "You are really creative!" or "What a beautiful stack of blocks you built!"



CDI/ PRIDE skills tips

- Avoid rhetorical questions
 - Can lead to contamination
- No mind reading
 - If the child points or mimes, simply describe the non-verbal behavior without “understanding”
 - Don’t interpret what you think the child is drawing or building
- Don’t say “hello”, “goodbye”, or ask for a please or thank you
 - Instead:
 - “Nice to see you!”
 - “I’m looking forward to playing with you today!”
 - “Can’t wait to see you tomorrow!”
- Avoid eye contact. Play side by side at first.

What if we accidentally ask a question?

- Re-do!
 - “Wow, you really like playing Uno, don’t you?”
 - “Whoops, re-do! You have a big smile on your face, and you are really good at matching all the colors and numbers!”
- Why point out our own mistakes?
 - We are correcting ourselves to do it the right way... This is hard at first!
 - Modeling tolerance of mistakes and warm acceptance of imperfections can help perfectionistic kids feel more comfortable taking risks and making mistakes

VDI

Verbal Directed Interaction

- The second rung on our “Brave Talking Ladder”
- At this rung, we ARE helping the child practice speaking verbally
- Try this after the child seems a bit more comfortable, relaxed, and engaged in what you are playing together.
- It’s a positive sign if the child has spoken in front of you (even if not to you!)
- No hard and fast rule about how long we have to spend in CDI prior to VDI... read the child’s body language and give it a try!

VDI Do's and Don'ts

(Dr. Steven Kurtz, Selective Mutism University course)

DO	DON'T
Labeled Praise for Talking	Ignore verbalizations
Reflect Verbalizations	Mind Read
Play-by-Play Announcer	Indirect Commands to Talk: “Why don't you tell so-and so what you want to be when you grow up?”, “Can you say what you want for lunch?”
Forced Choice questions first Open Ended Questions later	Avoid yes/no questions (too easy to answer with a non-verbal head nod or shake)
Clear prompts to Talk	Comment on not talking
Wait 10 seconds to Respond	Don't keep asking asking questions if they are not answering

VDI tips

- Start with “forced choice questions” with an EASY, factual answer.
- Format is: “X, Y, or something else?”
- The first question should not be about something personal to the child.
 - “Is this block red, or blue, or something else?”- Good!
 - “Should the princesses go on a quest to another castle, or maybe they’d like to go underwater and be mermaids, or something else?”- Harder



VDI tips

If the child answers...

THE BIG 3!

1. Repeat the child's answer aloud (Reflection... remember CDI?)
 - "Red."
2. For every sound or answer, give specific labeled praise (From CDI again!)
 - "Thanks for letting me know"
 - "Thanks for telling me that"
 - "That was really brave of you to answer my question"
3. Give a sticker or check mark



VDI tips

What if you accidentally ask a yes/ no question, and they respond non-verbally?

- Behavior description
 - “You’re nodding.”
 - “You’re giving a thumbs down.”
- “Re-do!” and rephrase as a forced-choice
 - “Do you want some help, or no help?”
 - “Did you bring a snack today, or no snack?”



VDI

What if the child doesn't answer

- Wait 10 seconds
- If the child points instead of answering say “I see you are pointing,” but do not interpret. Pretend not to understand.
- By acknowledging but not understanding you increase motivation to speak
- If child still doesn't answer after 10 seconds, and ask the SAME question again.
- Wait 10 seconds again
- Give them two tries at the same question

VDI

What if the child doesn't answer

If the child still doesn't answer after two tries at the same question, we have a few choices:

- 1) Ask the question through an already-established brave talking intermediary (someone they already feel comfortable talking to).
- 2) Try it in the hall or away from others.
- 3) "I can tell you're thinking hard about it, I'm going to ask again later because I'd like to know"
 - Write the question down to ask again later (remember this question is now contaminated, so when the child seems ready to work back up to answering, don't start with this question)
 - Too soon, need more CDI. Stop asking more questions until the child is more comfortable!

LEAVE NO QUESTION UNANSWERED!



Fade-in procedure



Fade-In

- “Pass the baton” of talking to a new person by sliding in the new person and sliding out the familiar person
- Stimulus fading
 - Keep the response (child talking) the same, and change the stimulus (who the child is talking to) in small, successive increments
- Start with the familiar person as an intermediary (parent, counselor, another comfortable adult the child has reliably talked to)
- Change only one thing (person, place or activity) at a time
- Low pressure, light-hearted, and fun!
- We follow the child’s lead
 - Some kids warm up right away
 - Some kids take several sessions to warm up

Fade-In Steps

1. Child and parent engage in a favorite activity alone in the room.
2. After about 10 minutes, and once child is speaking comfortably to parent, New Talking Partner (NTP) enters the room. Look busy, talk on the phone, turn back to child and pretend to be typing, etc.
 - a. “Defocused communication”
3. Parent ignores NTP, and continues playing and asking forced-choice questions
4. NTP turns and engages a little more. NTP does CDI to the parent. “Mr. So-and-so, I see you are drawing with so many colors.”
5. NTP sits a little closer. Continue CDI with parent.

Fade-In Steps continued

6. NTP begins CDI with child.
7. NTP engages in the activity with child and parent. Continue CDI with both child and parent.
8. If the child says anything, or responds to parent question, NTP will do the “Big 3”.
9. NTP does a VDI forced-choice question with the parent. Parent is modeling answering NTP’s question.
10. NTP does a VDI forced-choice question with the child.
11. After child has answered several of the NTP’s questions, parent will fade-out. This can be done gradually, or more quickly, depending on the child’s tolerance.

What happens if the child stops talking?

- Take a step back to the previous step where the child was talking
- Don't let questions go unanswered. If no answer to open-ended, rephrase as forced-choice
- If still no answer, use the steps discussed in the VDI section
 - Intermediary
 - Parent and child try the question away from NTP
 - "I can see you are thinking about that question, I'm going to ask you again later because I would really like to know!"
 - More CDI



Additional approaches, especially for kids who can't speak words yet

- Video self-modeling'
- Ritual sound approach
- Shape sounds of first letter (“b-” for “blue”)
- Practice getting air across lips (blowing bubbles, pinwheel)
- Humming non-word sounds to vibrate vocal chords
- Animal sounds

Supports at school

- Goal: Increase the people, situations, and activities in which the student will respond verbally or initiate speech
- Ask for a child support meeting (MTSS) meeting
- Make sure all school personnel are aware that the child has selective mutism. Be sure to include art, music, PE teachers and cafeteria staff.
- All staff should use CDI and don't ask questions.
- Fade in with classroom teacher
- Identify at least one support person who can be the brave talking partner using fade in process. Someone other than classroom teacher.
- Find balance between reasonable accommodations and low expectations.
- Ask for a special education evaluation
- Demonstrate the impact on the child's ability to function in school academically, socially or activities of daily living.

Exceptions for health and safety

The child may need to communicate but is not ready to initiate verbal communication. And no intermediary is available.

A card or pointing may be used to indicate:

- Need to use the bathroom (or a set time and being told to go)
- Snack or lunch choice
- Feeling sick or hurt
- Needing help with work
- Needing help with a social problem
- But not AAC device

Special Education 101

- Parents have the right to ask for a special education evaluation
- There are many disability categories but the one that makes the most sense in a school setting is Speech Language Impairment (SLI).
- IEP is a detailed plan on how the school will support the child - There is a case manager and support services
- 504 plans vary from district to district. Details accommodations only that will be implemented in the classroom
- If parents disagree with the school team's assessment they can request an independent evaluation.
- Check the Colorado Department of Education website: www.cde.state.co.us

Why Speech Language Impairment?

- Selective mutism is a communication Impairment that prevents a child from receiving reasonable educational benefit from regular education.
- Selective mutism interferes with oral communication in academic and social interactions.
- Research has show that over 50% of children with selective mutism have some form of language deficit
- “The student does not need to be below grade level or failing in an academic area for the disability to be determined to have an adverse effect on education.”

Social or Emotional Functioning

- Pragmatic language impairments may cause peer relationships to suffer and interfere with the student's ability to participate in cooperative group assignments within the classroom.
- Absenteeism may be a result of anxiety around the speech disorder.
- Classroom behavior may be a result of an underlying speech or language disorder.
- Independent Functioning
- Speech or language disorders may present difficulties in asking and understanding directions, expressing conflict or emergency situations, and clarifying and sharing information related to vocational responsibilities related to retaining employment, living situations, and social relationships.
- Speech or language disorders may result in a reluctance to speak with people in authority.
- Career paths may be chosen that require minimal verbal communication.

Colorado State Guidelines



Colorado Speech or Language Impairment Guidelines

Assessment and Eligibility



Parent and student rights

Parent and Child Rights in Special Education

Procedural Safeguards Notice

An Explanation of Procedural Safeguards Available Under Provisions of
the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
and
the Colorado Rules for the Administration of
the Exceptional Children's Educational Act (ECEA)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Federal law concerning the education of students with disabilities, requires schools to provide parents of a child with a disability with a notice containing a full explanation of the procedural safeguards available under the IDEA and U.S. Department of Education regulations. A copy of this notice must be given to parents only one time a school year, except that a copy must be given to the parents: (1) upon initial referral or parent request for evaluation; (2) upon receipt of the first State complaint and upon receipt of the first due process complaint in a school year; (3) when a decision is made to take a disciplinary action that constitutes a change of placement; and (4) upon parent request. [34 CFR §300.504(a)]

What parents can do at home/ community

- Community exposures
 - Set up a script and practice ahead of time
 - Go to a highly motivating place (ice cream, Starbucks, library)
 - Level 1, 2 and 3
 - 1= Parent ask a forced-choice, and child responds to parent in front of cashier/ librarian (“Do you want chocolate or vanilla?”, “Do you want a book about dogs or cats?”)
 - 2= Write down the question on a card, ask cashier to read the question. Child has already practiced their answer.
 - 3= Child says their planned line to the new person (“I’d like vanilla, please.”)

What parents can do at home/ community

- Fade-ins with family, neighbors and friends
 - Parents can educate others on basic fade-in skills ahead of time
- Playdates with friends
 - Helping siblings to support by not talking for their siblings
 - Set up a structured plan ahead of time
- Exposure lifestyle
 - Find opportunities for your child to practice facing their fears of talking every day

Games and activities to encourage brave talking

Board and Card Games

Go Fish
Guess Who
Picture matching / memory games
Bingo (child can be the caller)
Candyland
Headbandz
Would you rather
Jenga
Uno
Zingo
Yahtzee
Battleship

Apps

Bla Bla Bla
Magic Voice
Furry Friend
Voice Changer Plus
My Talking Pet
bouncyballs.org

Activities

Legos
Magnatiles
Drawing
Jewelry making
Sidewalk chalk
Floor is Lava
Hide-and-seek
Scavenger hunt
Balloon Toss

**Physical movement is great for helping kids with anxiety!

I Spy
Mad Libs

Pinwheels
Blowing bubbles

**Both are good for practicing getting air across lips for kids who aren't ready to use words yet

Resources

Selective Mutism University - <https://selectivemutismuniversity.thinkific.com/>
Free online courses for CDI and VDI

Selective Mutism Association - <https://www.selectivemutism.org/>
Resources for parents, educators and professionals
Colorado contact: Sheila Lepkin - srlepkin@gmail.com

ASHA - <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/selective-mutism/>
American Speech and Hearing Association - resources for parents and speech language pathologists

Smart Center - <https://selectivemutismcenter.org/what-is-selective-mutism/>
Selective mutism, anxiety and related disorders treatment center

Colorado Department of Education - <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/sd-sli>
Information on qualification for Speech-language Impairment

Colorado Department of Education -
<https://www.cde.state.co.us/spedlaw/procedural-safeguards-notice>
Parent and student rights related to special education

Anxiety Canada - <https://www.anxietycanada.com/ages/children/>
Links to articles and videos related to selective mutism

Sheila Lepkin - Youtube videos
[Selective Mutism: Community Exposures](#)
Initial Slide In - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxs5YonlzSs>

Thank You!

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