



E.A.T.  
Speech Therapy

# WHY IS MY CHILD NOT SPEAKING AT SCHOOL?



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Selective Mutism (SM) is a childhood anxiety disorder. Children with SM are able to speak but can't speak in certain social situations due to the fear that it causes them.

Typically children with SM will speak confidently and freely at home but are unable to speak with teaching staff at school and less familiar adults. They may or may not be able to speak to peers.

## Avoid:

- Asking the child why they don't speak - they probably don't know!
- Begging, bribing or tricking the child into speaking.
- Asking direct questions that put the child on the spot.
- Looking directly at the child after asking them a questions.
- Giving special attention for silence.
- Acting suprised or making a big deal when the child does speak.
- Expecting talking to generalise to other people, places or activities once the child begins to speak - take it slow and step by step.
- Pushing social conventions e.g. please/thank you, hello/goodbye - these are the hardest for children with SM and will come with time.

## Try:

- Letting the child know you understand it's hard for them to talk at the moment and you are happy for them to talk when they are ready.
- Continuing to speak to the child but swap questions for comments and rhetorical statements e.g. "i wonder if..." to provide an opportunity to speak without expectation.
- Allowing the child to respond non-verbally and changing your questions so that they can be answered with a point or head nod/shake.
- Helping the child to feel valued by giving them responsibilities and tasks that they can feel proud of.
- Finding out the child's interests and talents and engaging them in these activities to help build connection.
- Allowing the child to pass a message through their friends and parents as step towards direct communication but make sure others are not speaking for them
- Respond casually to comments from peers e.g. "Sarah can speak, she speak's beautifully at home and she will speak here when she is ready".
- Let the child know they can respond by pointing, nodding and shaking their head when it's too trick to talk.

*SM is phobia, these children experience the freeze of the body's automatic fight, flight, freeze response when faced with a situation where they are expected to speak. They are avoiding speaking due to the anxiety it causes them.*

*This in turn causes them to try and avoid any situations that involve an expectation to speak. Some, but not all, children with SM experience anxiety with any form of communication.*

*They can struggle to give eye contact, write and/or use gesture when expected to communicate. This may make it appear as if they are rude or ignoring people but this is not the case. Neither are these children shy or introvert. Often they are quite the opposite at home!*

*SM can often occur in combination with picky eating, sleeping and behavioural difficulties in the home environment with these children constantly fighting a battle between the want to speak and the need to control their anxiety.*

**For more information and a free 15 minute consult visit  
[www.eatspeechtherapy.co.uk](http://www.eatspeechtherapy.co.uk)**