



THE  
**HOUSSON CENTER**  
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

8100 Lomo Alto Dr., Suite 100 · Dallas, Texas 75225  
Office: (214) 351-0053 · Fax: (214) 351-5581

## Selective Mutism

When children are unable to speak around certain people or in certain settings, they may have an anxiety disorder called **selective mutism (SM)**. It is common for kids with SM to be very chatty at home with family but silent at school. Parents typically start noticing signs of SM when a child is three or four years old. The disorder might not be diagnosed until the child is school-aged, as this is when problems with speaking become more apparent.

### Statistics

- This disorder is rare; less than 1% of the population has SM
- It is equally likely to develop in boys and girls
- Children with selective mutism often have another anxiety disorder, most often a social anxiety disorder.

### Symptoms

- Talking freely at home, but becoming completely or mostly nonverbal at school or around strangers
- Inability to speak even to familiar adults (such as parents) in the presence of others
- Difficulty talking with peers in school
- Seeming “shut down” or “paralyzed” in social situations
- Using gestures, facial expressions and nodding in place of verbal communication
- Selective mutism is more common among children who speak a second language. Being bilingual doesn't cause SM, but for kids who already have an anxious temperament, being expected to use a language they are less comfortable with can put them at additional risk.

## Risk Factors for Children

- An anxiety disorder
- Poor family relationships
- Untreated psychological issues
- Self-esteem problems
- Problems with sound processing
- A speech or language problem, such as stuttering
- Family history of anxiety disorders
- A traumatic experience

## Treatment

- Kids with SM respond best to behavioral therapy that is focused on helping them learn to speak in new settings, during new activities and with new people.
- Children with SM should never be pushed to speak. The pace of treatment should be gradual, and children shouldn't be asked to do something that is too difficult for them. Instead, treatment should follow specialized behavior therapy techniques that prompt speech and then reinforce successful speaking experiences with lots of labeled praise and small incentives.
- Clinicians should model treatment around real life settings and situations. For example, because kids with SM typically struggle to speak at school, the Brave Buddies<sup>SM</sup> group program takes place in a simulated classroom and follows a typical school day, with activities like a morning meeting, show and tell and snack time.
- Encourage effort to talk, and not speak up in place of the children before giving them a chance.
- Medication:
  - Antidepressants, such as SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors)
  - Kids may be required to take them for up to 9-12 months so that they experience the full benefit.

## How Can I Help My Child?

- Understand that a child with SM is not being oppositional or unwilling to speak, rather, they are unable to speak in certain situations.

## Resources:

- [How to Help a Child with Selective Mutism | Mute Children | Child Mind Institute](#)
- [Selective Mutism | Psychology Today](#)
- [Selective Mutism: Symptoms & Treatment \(clevelandclinic.org\)](#)
- [What is Selective Mutism | Selective Mutism and Anxiety Disorders \(selectivemutismcenter.org\)](#)
- [Selective mutism - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)
- [How to Help a Child With Selective Mutism | SMA](#)
- <https://www.anxietycanada.com/disorders/selective-mutism/>
- <https://www.cedars-sinai.org/health-library/diseases-and-conditions---pediatrics/s/selective-mutism.html>

## Extra Helpful Resources (Books)

- *The Whole Brain Child* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.
- *How to Talk so Little Kids Will Listen* by Joanna Faber and Julie King
- *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *No-Drama Discipline; the Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture your Child's Developing Mind* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.
- *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD* by Eli R. Lebowitz, Ph.D.
- *Freeing your Child from Anxiety* by Tamar E. Chansky, Ph.D.