

# Situational Mutism Information Pack

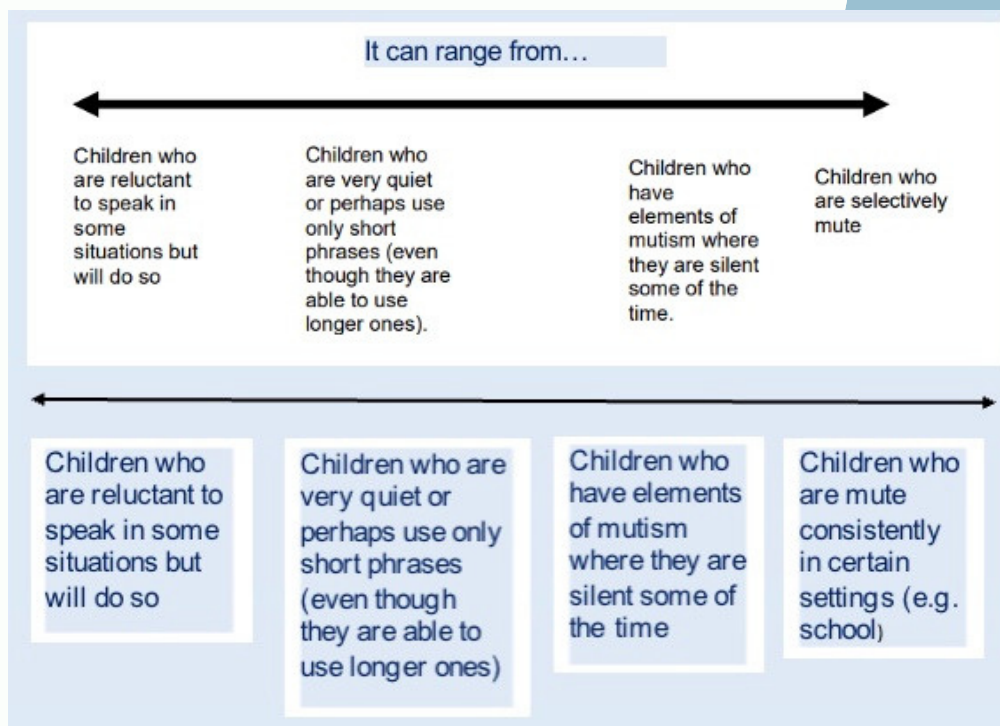
This Situational Mutism information pack has been co-produced by a multiagency group involving representatives from Birmingham and Solihull CCG, Solihull Parent Carer Voice, Birmingham Parent Carer Forum, North Solihull Additional Needs Group, Birmingham and Solihull Educational Psychology services, Solihull Inclusion Support Service and Birmingham SEND Therapy Team.

The pack provides information about Situation Mutism and the approaches that parent/carers, schools, and other settings, can adopt to support children who are struggling to talk confidently.

The documents draw on information provided by the charity Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA). SMIRA is well respected nationally and internationally providing information and resources for parents, carers and other professionals. It operates a Facebook page and regularly updated webpage which can be found by visiting [www.selectivemutism.org.uk](http://www.selectivemutism.org.uk).

# What is Situational Mutism (SM)

Situational Mutism (SM), also called Selective Mutism, is an anxiety-based mental health disorder which usually commences in early childhood. Those with SM speak fluently in some situations but remain consistently silent in others. They may have a blank expression, or appear 'frozen' when expected to speak. Early identification and treatment is vitally important. It can be unhelpful to 'wait and see' as young people with SM benefit most from quick access to support Situational Mutism Information Pack. It is important to understand that children with selective mutism want to speak, but find themselves physically unable to do so due to their anxiety.



- This often occurs in new situations with less familiar adults
- It is not bad behaviour or normal shyness
- It is a type of social anxiety whereby some children fear others hearing their voice. Just like you would avoid spiders if you were afraid of them, children avoid talking because they're afraid of others hearing their voice
- It is common for young children to be reluctant to communicate when they first start a new Early Years setting when they are first separated from their parent/carers

- If an inability to verbally communicate becomes more persistent and difficult to overcome, the child may require additional strategies to help them.
- An inability to communicate can affect their ability to make friends and succeed at school, and could lead to total speech avoidance if a child is simply left to 'grow out of it'

## Further information

[SMIRA – Quiet child or SM?](#)

[Anxiety Canada – Myths about SM](#)

[Selective Mutism Information & Research Association \(SMIRA\)](#)



## What causes selective mutism?

There is no one clear cause. It may involve many factors, including psychological, emotional and social. It can be triggered by big changes like starting school or going into hospital. It is more common in girls. It is normal for young children to have a period of not talking in the first few months of learning an additional language. This is not situational mutism.

## Will it get better?

With early support, yes, it is very likely to get better. Occasionally, it can persist into older childhood and adulthood.

## Situational Mutism – How I feel..... Our young people's voices

### Situational Mutism- how I feel.....

why wont anyone help  
 not listened to  
 silenced i want to talk  
 help me unheard worried  
 scared  
 frustrated listen to me  
 judged no one hears me anxious i cant talk i want help  
 no one believes me  
 no one listens  
 find a way to communicate

## Situational Mutism – what does it “look like

Children and young people with Situational Mutism are often described as

- Heavily reliant on classmates and friends.
- Often described as ‘shy’.

Behaviours often described as extreme – ‘rule following/passive’ or ‘defiant’.

- ‘Freeze’ response common in challenging / difficult situations.
- More females referred than males.

Referrals for support are often made a significant time after concerns were first noticed. There can be a mindset of ‘waiting to see if they grow out of it’, which can often lead to delays in referrals to services and support. Here are some examples of how situational mutism can present at different ages and stages although it is important to note that all children and young people will be different.

## Early years

It is important to remember that young children are all unique, and show different developmental trajectories, i.e. meeting milestones at different points.

Here is some information which can provide a bit more information on early years development:



[Early Years advice sheets \(solihull.gov.uk\)](http://solihull.gov.uk)

[Early Years | Local Offer Birmingham](#)

You can also speak to a health visitor about any concerns you may have about your child’s language development: Refer to HV services if concerned they can refer to

- Parents may describe communication as being fine at home and feel confused about nursery/pre school raising concerns.
- Highly reliant upon another friend in school staying close with them throughout the school day.
- Wants their friend to only interact with them and can be upset when they play with others.
- Follows routines and rules within school.
- Does not speak to adults or peers in school.
- Follows/ plays alongside others on the playground or stands alone.
- Nursery or pre-school may have advised parent/carer to speak to their health visitor



## Primary School

### Key stage 1

- May be described as very chatty and described as ‘full of fun’ and ‘cheeky’ at home.
- May play, talk and laugh with friends on the playground but not talk directly to adults in school.
- Might not put their hand up or make verbal contributions in class.
- Could avoid eye contact and show closed body language when in class.
- May look down when spoken to by an adult or put on the spot.
- May answer the register or yes/no questions in a whisper.
- Settings can seek support from Advisory Support Services and Educational Psychology

### Key stage 2

- Could be described as defiant – regularly not following instructions or completing work in class.
- May be described as outgoing and talkative in the family home. Less confident to talk in the community or larger family gatherings outside of the house. A little more confident if close to parents/carers.
- May find it difficult to engage in school work and be seen as not following rules or instructions.
- Staff may have noted that they engaged better in learning during lockdown when there were a small number of pupils attending school.
- Difficulty with transition into school / separation from parent/carers.
- History of times when they spoke a little in school and times when they have not spoken at all. (e.g. did not speak at all in Reception but spoke a little in nursery, which was a smaller group or similar).
- May have spoken in a whisper to a few members of school staff on rare occasions to get needs met.
- School may have sought support from Educational Psychology Service



## Secondary School

### Key stage 3

- May use gestures rather than speaking.
- May find it hard to maintain friendships.
- Could find it difficult to receive praise in public but find it ok in private.
- May work best in a smaller class group.
- Using writing as an alternative to talking in school.
- Setting has identified a key staff to work with them weekly. Using games that does not require verbal language such as chess was key to build rapport following advice from SEND therapy team/Inclusion Support Service
- Setting attempting to identify peers who share similar interests to develop a social network.
- Setting sharing positive impact of implementation of guidance. Pupil has started to volunteer answers in some lessons.
- Professionals discussed techniques, sliding in and lone talking. Also signposted to Maggie Johnson: The Selective Mutism Resource Manual and SMIRA.
- Communicates verbally with key trusted adults.
- May benefit from adult support in school whilst wanting and valuing their independence and to not stand out from classmates.
- Increasing periods of non-attendance.
- YP Young person is able to communicate using some small gestures such as head nods, shoulder shrugs. They can also sometimes communicate by writing.
- SENCO offering 1:1 support -some concerns with receptive language and processing skills. SENCO advised to refer to School Support Services and Educational Psychology for further investigations.

### Key stage 4

- Speaks freely at home and will give short social greetings in the community when with other family members. They will also verbally communicate when playing online
- They are unable to verbally express their needs in public situations and is potentially very vulnerable should they encounter any difficulties when outside the house without them.
- They are able to respond in lessons by nodding or shaking their head, and can point to answers or write answers
- May be receiving support for anxiety
- Indicate they would like to be able to talk to others and engage in interventions for support.
- School seek support from Educational Psychology Service



## What can you do to help?

- Avoid bribing or putting pressure on a child or young person to speak as this is likely to make things worse.
- Let them know you understand that they sometimes have difficulty speaking. Show patience and reassure them that they can start to talk when they feel ready to but until then to just have a good time and do what they feel able to.
- Respond warmly and naturally to any attempts to communicate e.g. through gesture or whispering.
- If the child does talk to you, do not draw any attention to it just respond naturally. If the child looks upset that she/he spoke, simply say 'I heard your voice and that's ok. You can speak again when you are ready.'
- Comment on what you are doing rather than asking direct questions. This will help the child to feel relaxed and as if she/he is in a conversation without any pressure to answer.
- Use "I wonder..." phrases rather than questions "I wonder if you did painting again today".....pause, rather than "did you do painting?"
- Give me tasks when I can work with and help others without talking e.g. showing friends where things are, helping staff with tasks
- Encourage children to use non-verbal communication e.g. nodding, pointing or waving to communicate. With older children, provide pen and paper so he/she can write answers down if she/he does not feel ready to talk but wants to communicate with you.
- Allow me to access appointments online and use chat, email and text functions
- Make sure I know who I can communicate with if I am unwell or unsafe with options to write, email, text or use symbols.
- Spending time with therapy pets in school can help

**I UNDERSTAND**



## Resources, advice and guidance for parents and professionals

SMIRA – Dos and Don'ts for Pre and Primary School

SMIRA - Guidance for Special Arrangements and Exemptions from School Exams

SMIRA – Dos and Don'ts for Secondary School

SMIRA – Older children and teens with SM

SMIRA - What to say when

A fact sheet for teachers – Solihull Inclusion Support Service

## Resources, advice and guidance for Children and Young People

Teenagers and adults with selective mutism can find information and support at [iSpeak](#) and the Facebook group [SM SpaceCafe](#).

[SMIRA](#) – Letter templates for young people and adults when writing applications, formal letters etc

[SMIRA](#) – What support is available at University?



## Services with text, online chat or email options for support

[www.emergencysms.org.uk](http://www.emergencysms.org.uk) – The Relay UK service lets deaf, hard of hearing, or speech-impaired people in the UK alert police, ambulance, fire, or coastguard services by either calling via a relay assistant or texting a message to 999 using our emergencySMS service.

[1-2-1 counsellor chat | Childline](#) – Chat with a counsellor online about whatever's worrying you.

[Home - Kooth](#) – online mental wellbeing community - Free, safe and anonymous support

[Write an email | Samaritans](#) – Samaritans email service

If you would like further information about support and training available for professionals please contact:

- [Solihull Inclusion Support Service SEMH team](#)
- [Community Educational Psychology Service \(Solihull\)](#)
- [Birmingham Educational Psychology Service](#)
- [Birmingham SEND Therapy Team](#)

If you would like further information about support and training available for parent/carers please contact:

- SMIRA
- Class Teacher/School SENCo/Pastoral Lead

# ACCEPTANCE . INCLUSION . UNDERSTANDING

