



Lawns Park Primary  
School

## A Quick Guide to Situational Mutism

### What is Situational Mutism?

Situational Mutism is a complex anxiety disorder characterised by a child's inability to speak and communicate effectively in select social settings, such as school. These children are able to use spoken language to communicate in settings where they feel comfortable, secure, and relaxed, for example at home.

Situational Mutism is not a wilful refusal to speak. Not all children manifest their anxiety in the same way. Some not use spoken language at all or communicate to anyone in a social setting, whilst others may be able to speak to a select few or perhaps whisper. Some children may completely freeze as they are confronted with specific social settings, whereas some may be able to use spoken language to interact with one or a few children but are unable to with their teachers or most peers.

A child's Situational Mutism can often be misinterpreted as shyness and never addressed as a possible barrier to their learning.

### Implications for a pupil

- Talking freely at home but not being able to use spoken language at school or around those they are less familiar with.
- Not being able to speak to familiar adults (such as parents) in the presence of others.
- Difficulty using spoken language with peers in school.
- Seeming "shut down" in social situations.
- Using gestures, facial expressions and nodding in place of verbal communication.
- Stiff or awkward body language when in a social setting. Some will turn their heads, chew, or twirl their hair, avoid eye contact, or withdraw into a corner or away from the group seeming to prefer playing alone.

- They may be unable to ask to go to the bathroom and so may have accidents in class or feel very uncomfortable, which can add to their anxiety.
- They may be wary of doing anything that draws attention to them because they think that by doing so, they will be expected to talk. For example, they may not do their best in class after seeing other children being asked to read out their good work.
- They may be worried about changes in routine or appearance in case this provokes comments or questions e.g., arriving at school late due to an appointment, having their haircut or wearing new clothes.
- They may fear making mistakes as they could be expected to talk this through with someone.
- Children may have difficulties with homework as they are unable to ask questions about it in class beforehand.
- Teenagers may not develop independence as they are afraid of leaving the house alone and having to communicate with others.

### How to help – top tips

1. Focus on developing positive relationships with the child and getting to know them, so that they may begin to feel comfortable around you.
2. If the child is able to use gestures and hand signals (like pointing, nodding, giving a thumbs up or down) or visual support, use these methods of communication to help them participate in class. It can be an effective way for them to answer questions, have their needs met and show them that their participation is valued.
3. If a child has a particular friend that they are already comfortable using spoken language with, arranging for them to sit next to each other may decrease their inhibition and increase their opportunities to speak up.
4. Some children feel less anxiety when they are doing activities inside of a smaller group and may feel more comfortable to use spoken language.

5. Children with situational mutism can benefit from being able to come to the classroom with parents and “warm up” before anyone else is there. This allows the child to practice being verbal in that environment without the pressure of having the teacher or peers there.
6. Use simple questions and prompting that can be answered by nodding or shaking their head to ensure the child has their needs met without having to ask themselves e.g. “Do you need to go to the toilet?” or “Would you like a drink?”

## Further advice and support

---

Detailed guidelines and advice for supporting children with Selective Mutism - [selectivemutismpracticeguidelines.pdf](https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/~/media/00000000000000000000000000000000/selectivemutismpracticeguidelines.pdf) ([aberdeenshire.gov.uk](https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk))

Selective Mutism information and resources - [Selective Mutism Information & Research Association \(SMIRA\)](https://www.selectivemutism.org/)