

Staff card: selective mutism – what it is and what it is not

Who it's for: all staff in the setting · **Linked to the Toolkit:** Chapter 1

Selective mutism is a situational block affecting speech, with anxiety at its root. The child speaks freely in safe situations (e.g. at home), but in others (e.g. at school, around unfamiliar people) cannot get their voice out – even though they want to.

Selective mutism IS:	It is NOT:
• an anxiety response – a situational block affecting speech • the child speaks freely where they feel safe • a difficulty that can be eased with early, calm support • independent of knowledge and ability (no speech ≠ no knowledge)	• stubbornness, manipulation, laziness or bad manners • hearing loss • not knowing the language • a sign of low intellectual ability

Three principles for all staff

- Take the pressure off speaking – do not force an answer here and now.
- Do not comment on the silence ('come on, say something', 'you can do it').
- Allow the child to answer by gesture, pointing or in writing; give a few seconds and do not hold intense eye contact.

Mini-glossary (optional)

Anxiety disorder: a difficulty in which intense anxiety blocks behaviour – here, speech.

'Inability', not 'unwillingness': the child cannot speak, rather than 'will not'.

Factors: predisposing (sensitivity, anxiety) · triggering (a new situation, pressure) · maintaining (pressure, commenting on silence, stepping in for the child).