



DCDSB Understanding & Supporting All Learners

Selective Mutism/Reluctant Speakers versus “Extreme Shyness”

Selective Mutism is a mental health condition whereas shyness is a personality or temperamental trait. A shy person will eventually ‘warm up’ to a social situation and speak over time; people with Selective Mutism do not start to speak in anxiety-provoking situations simply because time passes. A common feature of Selective Mutism is a discrepancy in speaking patterns across settings or circumstances (e.g., speaks comfortably at home vs. restricted speaking at school).

Impact of Selective Mutism on learning and school functioning

Selective Mutism can have a huge impact on a student’s confidence when engaging with peers or adults. It may affect their social skills, their ability to make friends, and their ability to relate to others which in turn can lead to social isolation. A person’s inability to speak may impact on completing academic tasks (e.g., speaking in front of the class, answering questions, and reading aloud).

Teachers may observe a student who:

- Refuses or avoids speaking in specific situations or to specific people.
- Speaks in a low voice volume or in a whisper to their friends in class.
- Has difficulty maintaining eye contact.
- Communicates using gestures instead of words (e.g. pointing, pushing).
- Appears very anxious or nervous.

Helpful Resources for better understanding & supporting students with Selective Mutism

McHolm, A.E., Cunningham, C.E., Vanier, M.K. (2005). *Helping your child with selective mutism: Practical steps to overcome a fear of speaking.*

Bergman, R.L. (2012). *Treatment for children with selective mutism- An integrative behavioral approach.*

Anxiety Canada- www.anxietycanada.com

Selective Mutism Group- www.selectivemutism.org

Strategies to support those with Selective Mutism at Home

- Continue practicing conversations with selected peers and other partners who were selected since the beginning of the year.
- Use social media with a choice of audio and video, such as Face Time and Zoom for face-to -face communication.
- Avoid commenting on your child/adolescent’s selective mutism or bringing attention to it.
- Communicate with your school principal to discuss placement for the next year.
- Discuss teacher choice and students with whom your child/adolescent relates
- Increase opportunities for speaking with the extended family members using social media:
- Ask a current and a new teacher for the next year to make effort to communicate during the break.
- Contact your school support team to determine if a revision of a current conversational ladder may be appropriate for your child/adolescent.

This resource is not intended for diagnostic purposes. It is to be used as a reference for your own understanding and to provide information about the different kinds of difficulties you may encounter in your classroom.

