



PARENT TOOLKIT

Selective Mutism



Selective Mutism (SM) is an **anxiety-based condition** where a child is able to speak comfortably in some situations (often at home) but **is unable to speak in other settings** such as school, social groups, or with unfamiliar people.

This is not refusal — it is a **frozen fear response**. Children want to speak but their anxiety stops them.

This toolkit offers practical strategies to support communication, reduce anxiety, and build confidence.

Understanding Selective Mutism

- SM is a **phobic reaction to speaking** — the child becomes physically unable to talk.
- It is **not oppositional behaviour**.
- Pressure to speak increases the anxiety and makes talking even harder.
- Children may communicate in other ways: nodding, whispering, gestures, expression, or nonverbal cues.

Creating a Safe, Low-Pressure Communication Environment

- Adopt a **non-pressured approach** — avoid asking direct questions that require speech.
- Make comments instead of questions:
 - Instead of: *“What did you do today?”*

- Try: *“It looks like you had art today — I can see paint on your sleeve.”*
- Acknowledge feelings gently: *“Talking feels tricky right now and that’s okay.”*
- Celebrate communication in **all forms**, not just speech.
- Avoid saying things like “Use your voice” or “Just try to talk.”

Reducing Anxiety

- Keep routines predictable.
- Offer calm, quiet spaces.
- Use visual supports (timetables, choice boards) to reduce stress.
- Prepare your child ahead of new experiences or social events.
- Teach regulation tools:
 - Deep breathing
 - Fidget toys
 - Calm-down techniques
 - “Worry box” or journaling

Gradual Exposure (Small Steps to Talking)

Progress should be **slow, steady, and carefully planned**.
Pressure-free exposure is essential.

Common steps:

1. **Nonverbal communication** (pointing, nodding)
2. **Sounds** (laughing, coughing, making noises)
3. **Talking to a trusted adult in a safe space**
4. **Whispering to that adult**
5. **Talking quietly to that adult**
6. **Speaking with another child/adult present**

7. Building up to full speech in the desired setting

This process is known as “**sliding-in**” or **stimulus fading** and is often most effective when school and home coordinate the steps

Supporting Social Interaction

- Arrange playdates with **one familiar and trusted friend**.
- Choose structured, low-pressure activities (board games, Lego, crafts).
- Avoid drawing attention to speaking — focus on play and enjoyment.
- Ask trusted friends to be “communication partners.”

Working With School

- Ask for a **named staff member** who can develop a trusting relationship with your child.
- Encourage the school to:
 - Avoid highlighting the child’s silence
 - Allow alternative communication (cards, gestures, apps)
 - Use **graded exposure programmes**
 - Provide a calm, non-pressured environment
 - Avoid forcing speaking during group activities
- Teachers should:
 - Praise **effort**, not speech
 - Model calm responses
 - Include your child in activities even without verbal participation

Practical Tools That Help

- Communication cards or boards
- Visual timetables
- “How I feel today” emotion cards
- Voice recorder apps (for home-to-school sharing)
- Worry journals
- Calm boxes with sensory items
- Sliding-in programmes supported by therapists

Helpful Support & Services

- **Speech and Language Therapy services** – assessment and selective mutism programmes
- **Child Mental Health teams** – support for anxiety and emotional regulation
- **Selective Mutism Information & Training groups** – practical guidance, videos, and step-by-step plans
- **Education support services / Educational Psychologists** – help schools create gradual exposure programmes
- **Parent helplines and family support charities** – emotional support and coaching

Supporting Yourself as a Parent

- Remember: your child **is not choosing silence**.
- Celebrate small successes.
- Connect with other parents for support.
- Avoid comparing your child to others — progress looks different for every child.
- Be kind to yourself; this journey takes time, patience, and consistency.

Selective Mutism improves through **understanding, gentle support, and small, achievable steps.**

Your child's voice will come when **safety replaces fear.**
Every small moment of communication — a nod, a whisper, a smile — is progress worth celebrating.