

How to Help Children with Selective Mutism

“Caring for Children’s Mental Health Parent Education Series

Education Bureau 2022

What is “Selective Mutism” (SM)?

SM is a kind of Anxiety Disorders. People with SM can talk and interact normally in some situations (e.g., at home or with close family members), but they are unable to speak in some social situations (e.g., when facing teachers at school or strangers at home), which affects their learning or socialization.

They can talk normally in familiar environment (e.g., at home), but in certain social situations (e.g., at school or friends’ gatherings), they may act as follows:

- Unable to talk to others
- Manage to respond with one or two words in a whisper
- Communicate by nodding or shaking their heads, facial expressions and gestures instead of using verbal communication
- Shy, dependent and withdrawn
- React abruptly or freeze when they are aware of someone watching or approaching them

Role of Parents

If I suspect that my child has SM, I should...

- Seek psychiatric consultation and assessment for my child as early as possible, so that appropriate treatment and support training can be arranged for him/her
- Initiate contact with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), class teacher, the School Guidance Team or school social workers for arrangement of appropriate support services

After my child has been assessed as having SM, I should...

- Cooperate with healthcare professionals in undertaking the suggested treatment plan to ensure that my child receives the necessary treatment and take medication as prescribed (if applicable)
- Take the initiative to provide the school with the information about my child’s special educational needs as early as possible, including passing his/her psychiatric report to the school for arrangement of appropriate support services
- Maintain communication with the School Guidance Team or school social workers, SENCO, Student Support Team, class teacher and subject teachers to understand my child’s learning and adjustment; and jointly discuss appropriate support strategies if necessary

The following strategies may be considered when supporting your child:

Social and Communication

- Cultivate an open and positive social environment and set a good example for your child, e.g., parents take the initiative to demonstrate how to talk with others, and how to confidently and fluently engage in a conversation, etc.
- Encourage your child to respond in a social environment progressively with a caring and considerate attitude
- Ask family or friends to give your child appropriate personal space at gatherings and let your child try to participate in conversations or interact with others only when he/she feels ready, and avoid labelling your child as “not talking” in front of others
- Attend to your child’s level of anxiety in social situations. If you notice that his/her body language (such as lowering his/her head, curling up, etc.) reflects a rising level of anxiety, you should avoid forcing your child to speak
- Provide ample waiting time for your child to respond, and avoid intervening prematurely or speaking for your child
- Parents may simplify the questions that your children have to answer, e.g., changing open-ended questions to multiple-choice questions (such as “Do you want to drink orange juice, lemon tea or something else?”) to help your children respond
- Parents should praise your children (verbally or non-verbally) when they communicate with others or try to participate in social activities

Daily Training

- Encourage your child to express themselves verbally more often, and help them build verbal expression skills and confidence
- Invite peers over to play at home and start with activities requiring less oral communication, such as model making or clay making, to provide more opportunities for your child to get along with his/her peers in a familiar environment
- Let your child get used to hearing his/her own voice, e.g., watch video clips of conversations or interaction at home with your child

Support Measures and Strategies

In general, schools may provide the following support according to the needs of individual students:

Helping the Student on School Adjustment

- Give the student space and time to regulate their anxiety when necessary
- Explore activities that help the student interact with others in a relaxing way, and involve the student in these activities when appropriate
- Provide group training or individual counselling for the student to improve his/her social and emotion management and problem-solving skills, and strengthen his/her sense of competence and self-confidence
- Arrange designated teachers or guidance personnel to establish a stable rapport with the student and build a relationship with mutual trust with him/her. Provide assistance when the student need it or establish a support network for the student in school

Helping the Student Get Along and Communicate with Teachers and Peers

- Cultivate a safe and friendly learning environment, increase the interaction between the student and teachers through non-verbal activities or daily class routines, and build the foundation for enhancing his/her oral communication
- Take the initiative to care for the student, communicate with him/her in a low key and a natural tone, and establish a relationship of mutual trust
- Praise the student for his/her positive behaviours and efforts in all aspects, and avoid negating or criticising students' uneasy emotions and silent condition
- Arrange friendly and helpful peers to help the student in need. Help him/her build social circles, and strengthen the student's sense of belonging in class
- Teach the student self-relaxation methods and suggest the student to use them when necessary

Engaging the Student in Learning Activities

- Adjust expectations according to the student's condition and abilities, make accommodations in learning activities, questioning format and the response requirement, and progressively enhance the student's participation. Allow the student to communicate with others in different ways (such as by nodding/shaking his/her heads in response to yes/no questions) to reduce the student's anxiety and pressure from learning activities
- Give advance notice before asking questions or let other students answer the questions first, so that the student in need have enough time to prepare for his/her answers, and express appreciation and encouragement after the student answers the questions (verbally or non-verbally)
- When arranging group activities, the student may work with familiar and trusted classmates to enhance his/her participation
- Provide homework accommodations according to the student's needs (such as on oral expression) to reduce his/her pressure
- Provide special examination arrangements according to student's needs and suggestions from professionals

Strengthening Support and Home-School Cooperation

- Provide intensive support services to students with serious difficulties as needed, such as formulating an Individual Learning Plan, conducting regular reviews and follow-up
- Maintain close collaboration and communication among the school, parents and professionals (such as healthcare professionals, social workers, psychologists, etc.)

Useful Websites

Education Bureau

Homepage of the Education Bureau
<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

“SENSE” Integrated Education and Special Education Information Online Information
<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

“Mental Health @School” Student Mental Health Information Online
<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

Operation Guide on the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education
https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/integrated-education/download-area-and-related-links/ie_guide_en.pdf

Teacher's Resource Handbook on Understanding and Supporting Students with Mental Illness
[https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/Teacher's_Resource_Handbook_on_Understanding_and_Supporting_Students_with_Mental_Illness_\(August%202017\).pdf](https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/Teacher's_Resource_Handbook_on_Understanding_and_Supporting_Students_with_Mental_Illness_(August%202017).pdf)

Department of Health
Child Assessment Service
<https://www.dhcas.gov.hk/en/>

Student Health Service
<https://www.studenthealth.gov.hk/eindex.html>

Social Welfare Department
<https://www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/>

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service
<https://www.hkcss.org.hk/?lang=en>

Telephone Numbers for Enquiry
Education Bureau
General enquiries about special education 3698 3957

Hospital Authority
Hospital Authority Mental Health Direct (24 hours) 2466 7350

Department of Health
Child Assessment Service 2246 6659
Student Health Service 2349 4212

Community Resources and Helplines
<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/early-identification-at-the-selective-level/helplines-and-community-resources.html>