The Neurodivergent Classroom

Selective mutism at a Glance

Selective mutism means that, in certain situations, speech just isn't available for a while. The student can still understand, take part and communicate in other ways.



What you may notice in class

- Speaks little or not at all in class, even when they understand.
- Answers by nodding, pointing, writing or drawing.
- Looks tense, frozen or withdrawn when asked to speak.
- Avoids reading aloud, presentations, direct questions or asking for help.
- No spoken answer doesn't mean no understanding.
- Joining in depends on the room, the group or the person.
- After stressful moments they seem drained or tense.
- For younger kids, morning circle, surprise questions and reading aloud are especially hard. (elementary school)
- For older students, presentations, tests and group decisions are especially hard. (middle and high school)

Strengths

- Can show understanding without words.
- Writing, drawing and pointing let them truly take part.
- Can join in safely in small, familiar groups.
- Thinks along quietly, and it shows in their work.
- Their own signals can help you make good agreements.

What helps

- Take off the pressure to speak, and don't put them on the spot.
- Accept nonverbal and written answers as equally valid.
- Keep talking calmly and allow plenty of processing time.
- Comment and do things together instead of asking lots of questions.
- Plan familiar, cooperative small groups and clear transitions.
- Give early notice of changes in room, group or task.
- Agree on discreet signals for help, breaks and the restroom.
- When they do speak, react calmly and neutrally.
- Don't tie the learning goal to speaking on the spot.
- With younger kids, use pointing, drawing and familiar small groups. (elementary school)
- With older students, agree on written, digital and alternative ways to present. (middle and high school)

What tends not to help

- Calling on them to speak without warning.
- Mistaking silence for defiance or not knowing.
- Making a big public fuss when they speak.
- Talking about them and how they communicate, unprompted.

Words that carry

"You can write or show me the answer. Both count."

"You don't have to say anything right now. We'll find a way that works."

"I'm glad you're here."

"Today you can show or write what you know." (elementary school)

"Let's decide how you'll show your work." (middle and high school)

Where to find support

Selective Mutism Association (SMA)
selectivemutism.org
US nonprofit with information for families and educators.

SMIRA selectivemutism.org.uk
UK charity with school guidance, including dos and don'ts for teachers.

NHS: Selective mutism nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/selective-mutism
Clear health information from the UK National Health Service.

Local support
Many countries have selective mutism groups. A speech-language pathologist or child psychologist can advise.

More in the Teacher Portal: neurodivergentclassroom.com/teacher-portal/selective-mutism/

Sources: ASHA Practice Portal: Selective Mutism · NHS: Selective mutism · Child Mind Institute: Teacher's guide to selective mutism · AWMF S1 guideline: Elective mutism (in German)