

Supporting quiet children



Some children are naturally quiet, others are really noisy! But sometimes, being quiet can be a sign that there is something wrong and it can be hard to tell what's going on...

My child is talking with me at home but they're not saying anything at nursery at all. Is this normal?

There are lots of things that can affect your child's confidence to talk in school or nursery. Are they new or learning to speak English? If they are then maybe they're taking time to listen to conversations and are watching what's happening around them - we know that lots of children do this. Have a look at our factsheet [supporting children learning English as an additional language](#).

Has your child just started school or nursery? If so it may take some time to help them settle and find their feet meaning that they are quieter. Talk to your child's keyworker about how they are helping them to feel comfortable and make friends in the setting.

Sometimes it might be that they are shy and it takes them some time to build their confidence. But if your child is happy to chat with you at home but not at nursery or other settings then they may be unable to speak in these situations – this is often called selective mutism. This can then affect their ability to make friends, join in play and games and also to ask other people for what they want and need.

Talking to others involves taking turns to speak or play, listening and making eye contact. You may find that your child listens and makes eye contact but finds it hard to speak up in groups. They may want to join in but find it difficult. They may still use gestures and join in without talking. They may also take time to build their confidence.

If this carries on for a long time then you can talk to your child's keyworker about setting up an action plan so that everyone at the setting knows how to help them. You can also think about talking to a speech and language therapist for advice. You can find your local service by going to www.talkingpoint.org.uk. They may be able to offer an assessment and programme for your child's setting. This type of support involves building a relationship with someone they get on with at the setting. Therefore this support is usually delivered by the school. You can find out more about how to support children with selective mutism from SMIRA (Selective Mutism Information and Research Association). A link to their website is listed at the end of this factsheet.

I CAN Help enquiry service www.ican.org.uk/help

Call 020 7843 2544 to arrange a free phone call from one of our speech and language therapists or email enquiries@ican.org.uk

Talking Point www.talkingpoint.org.uk

Visit this website for information about children's communication.

What does it mean if a child has selective mutism? I'm not sure if my child is just quiet...

First of all, is your child talking with you at home? If they are and they're quiet around other children it could be that they just need time to build their confidence.

At nursery, it can take time to see if a child is settling and developing their relationships. If you and your child's setting are concerned about selective mutism you can contact other professionals, like a speech and language therapist, for advice. You can find out more by following the links at the end of the factsheet.

Children who do get a diagnosis of selective mutism can have a fear of interacting and speaking in social situations. This fear is often so overwhelming they find it difficult to respond and they appear to 'freeze' or become unresponsive. They may look as if they have 'shut down' and don't react in social situations. This is different from children who are reluctant, quiet or shy as they will usually join in with time and encouragement. Children who have selective mutism will need a structured programme to help them overcome their deep worry about speaking.

Selective mutism may first be noticed when they start school or nursery, as this is the first new place they have been without family and friends.

How can I get help?

If you are worried that your child may have selective mutism you can contact your local speech and language therapy department to talk about an assessment. You should also try and arrange meetings and discussions with your child's school or setting so that people who work with your child have strategies about how to help in place. You can read more about assessment and diagnosis of selective mutism by following the links at the end of this factsheet.

What can I do to help my quiet child to develop their social skills?

There are lots of things you can try:

- Try not to put too much pressure on them to talk. Accept all their attempts at communication even if it's just a glance, a gesture, or offering an object to another child. This way you can show them that you're valuing what they're saying, even if they're not using words at this stage.
- Try not to show that you're anxious or worried that they're not talking or interacting with other children.
- Show them how to start play and conversations so that they have support in doing this.

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- Set up small groups with friends and adults they know so that they can feel comfortable with them.
- Talk to your child about times that adults are sometimes worried about talking and find it hard.
- Sometimes giving them a role in a game (e.g. they can be the bus driver or the shop keeper) can help give them a focus and something to do. They can also think about what they might say in this role. Working from a script can help them to develop a pattern to conversations (e.g. when I see someone new 'I say hello'). This can give them support to develop their social skills.
- Follow their interests and what they really enjoy doing. Children are more likely to open up and talk about something they really love and things that fascinate them. They will also have more to talk about.
- Try some games that involve turn taking e.g. posting games, ball rolling, building towers together and 'Peepo'. These all have structured turns so that your child knows when their turn is. They can join in by making an action or speaking. They are learning to take turns during the play which lays the foundation for later social skills.
- Have a role during everyday activities e.g. giving out food at mealtimes, taking turns to stir cake mixture while you're cooking.
- Encourage them to make noises using musical instruments. This can get them used to the idea of making noise and being noisy. They can also join in without speaking.
- Comment on what they're doing as they play. This way you're adding the language for them even if they're not speaking.

There are more ideas for building turn taking skills in our [Early Talkers box sets](#) which, along with other resources, can be found in the I CAN [online shop](#).

However, if a child has selective mutism they will need an assessment and structured programme to help them.

Useful reading

[*Can I tell you about...Selective Mutism*](#)

[*Supporting Quiet Children*](#), Maggie Johnson and Michael Jones – designed for early years settings but you might find these ideas useful.

The Selective Mutism Information and Research association (SMIRA) have lots of really useful information and links to books, toys, games and also training courses for parents and professionals together with insightful blogs written by adults who had experience of selective mutism in their childhood: www.smira.org.uk

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[My Friend Daniel Doesn't Talk](#) by Sharon Longo. Speechmark publishing, 2006

[The Selective Mutism Resource Manual](#), Maggie Johnson & Alison Wintgens, 2001.
Speechmark Publishing Ltd

[Tackling Selective Mutism](#) Edited by Benita Rae Smith and Alice Sluckin, 2015
Jessica Kingsley Publishers

You may also find this article useful: [Please Don't Be Quiet](#), by Michael Jones. SEN Magazine, 2016.

Other useful organisations:

www.afasic.org.uk

I CAN have the I CAN Help Enquiry Service, an information line run by qualified speech & language therapists. If you have any questions about the speech and language skills of a child or would find it useful to talk about simple strategies to support communication, call 020 7843 2544 to book an appointment for a call back at a time convenient to you.

You can also e mail your questions to help@ican.org.uk

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