THE STUDENT WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM

WHAT IS SELECTIVE MUTISM?

Students who are able to use speech to communicate, but do so only with certain people in certain environments, can sometimes be described as having selective mutism. Often, these students speak only to their parents and siblings, and when strangers are present, may not even speak to these family members. As well, some students with selective mutism may speak to extended family or neighborhood children and be mute in school.

Besides not speaking in school, students with selective mutism may:

- have difficulty with eye gaze. While some students may make minimal eye contact and look away when spoken to, others may stare or make eye contact longer than appropriate;
- show an expressionless face when confronted with someone who they will not talk to;
- be tense and move slowly;
- walk with a shuffling gait;
- be very verbal at home; or may be very quiet and may speak less to their father;
- respond slowly, both verbally and non-verbally;
- be more likely to have accidents at school and may avoid using the bathroom.

Students with selective mutism may not:

- use non-verbal communication, such as pointing or head nodding for 'yes';
- take part in non-verbal activities (e.g., art, gym) or group activities (e.g., sports, free play);
- eat in school, as well as in other environments;

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP THEIR CHILD WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM?

Parents can help their child with selective mutism by acknowledging how hard it is for the child to speak at school and praising any small gain that their child makes in communicating with family or friends. In addition:
• Do respond with positive comments when your child informs you that he/she has spoken at school. Be low-key and act as though it is something that is expected and normal;
• Do schedule play dates with friends and encourage participation in community activities.
• Do make visits to the school or schoolyard before or after school when the other students are not present, as this will reduce anxiety and encourage speech in that location
• Don’t place undue pressure on your child to talk, offer to give a reward for talking or give negative consequences for not talking, as this may increase anxiety and worsen the problem;
• Don’t persistently ask your child if he/she spoke at school, as this is likely to increase anxiety. Discuss progress with the teacher or Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) instead;

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO HELP STUDENTS WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM?

Teachers can help the student with selective mutism by:

• **Telling** the student that they understand that speaking at school can be hard or scary;
• **Accepting** the student’s nonverbal communication attempts (e.g., gesturing, nodding and pointing), at first. If the student is involved in an intervention program with the school SLP, gradually increase expectations for verbal communication as he/she progresses. Encourage speaking at the level that the child consistently experiences success (e.g., single words);
• **Providing** positive experiences in school that do not involve talking (e.g., bringing the attendance card or messages to the office, handing out workbooks);
• **Refraining** from trying to get the student to talk, as this is likely to increase anxiety;
• **Trying** not to react when the student speaks and treat verbalizations a normal occurrence;
• **Refraining** from praising the student or bringing to their attention that you have noticed that he/she is speaking in the classroom, as this may increase his/her anxiety;
• **Arranging** preferential seating to reduce anxiety for the student, such as:
  o beside a preferred peer to encourage verbalization
  o away from the teacher's desk, if he/she is more comfortable with peers
  o at the back of the class so that he/she can speak to a peer without being seen or heard by other students
  o close to the teacher if the student is more comfortable with adults
• **Developing** a buddy system for recess;
• **Giving** the student a washroom pass so that he/she can go without having to ask verbally.