





Selective Mutism: Skills for Parents & Teachers



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What is Selective Mutism?

Diagnostic Criteria: consistent failure to speak in specific social situations when speaking is expected despite having the ability to speak comfortably in other settings. The failure to speak must be causing interference with educational, occupational, and/or social achievements. To be given an official diagnosis, symptoms must last for at least 1 month, excluding the 1st month of school.

Conceptualization: an anxiety based-disorder closely relating to social anxiety disorder or social phobia.

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TYPICAL COURSE

- Rarely secondary to traumatic event
- Stable; not episodic or phasic
- Unknown outcomes absent treatment
- Known trajectories of anxious youth into adolescence and adulthood

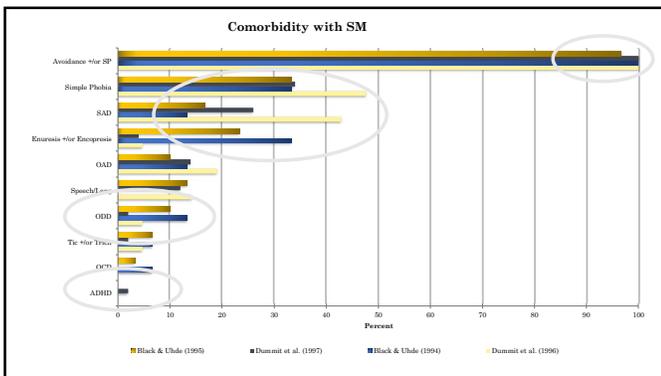
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PREVALENCE

- More common in girls than in boys
- Occurs in less than 1% of children in elementary school settings
 - Bergman, Piacentini, & McCracken (2002)
 - .7% Kg – 2nd grade
- This is equivalent to 1 per 140
- Bilingual children are over-represented in SM (Toppelberg, Tabors, & Coggins, 2005), although our knowledge is scarce regarding this issue.

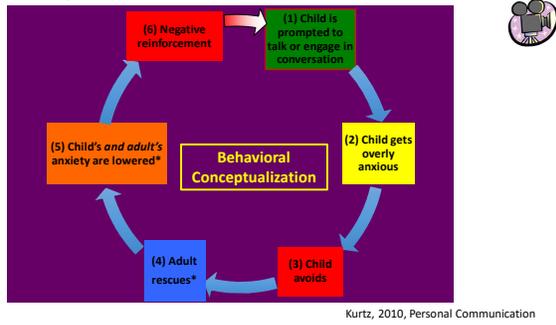
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Comorbidity with SM



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Cycle of Negative Reinforcement: Selective Mutism



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CONTAMINATION

- The school and others in their lives are associated with prior histories of not talking → CONTAMINATED
- New school & the therapist are not associated with any history of not talking
- Important to not ask any questions at all when first meeting the child
- “You do the math!” approach

Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

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Education about Fear and Anxiety

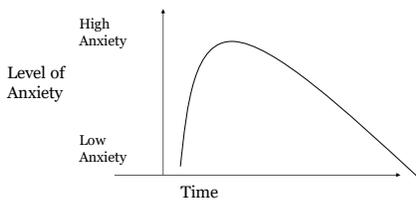
- Fear is...
 - Natural
 - Necessary
 - Harmless
- Fear is designed to...
 - Draw our attention to an immediate threat
 - Keep us safe by activating our fight-or-flight system



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Education about Anxiety: Habituation

- “Riding the Wave” of Anxiety



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Child Directed Interaction (CDI)



PCIT International, 2011

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CDI: Skills

- Labeled Praise
- Reflection
- Description

PCIT International, 2011

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CDI: Skills

- **Labeled Praise:** a positive statement regarding what the child is doing in the moment.

Examples:

- Adult
- Great job using your voice to answer my question!
- I like that you are playing with the toys so gently.
- Nice job sharing!
- I love that you looked at me while you told me that.
- It's fantastic that you stayed calm with me while mom left the room.

PCIT International, 2011

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CDI: Skills

- **Reflection:** a statement that repeats back to the child their verbalization.
 Avoid “tip-ups” in tone of voice.

Child	Adult
La la la la la.	La la la la la.
I'm hungry.	You said you are hungry!
What's your name?	You're wondering what my name is.
(whisper) I want to read.	Sarah just told me she wants to read! (teacher says aloud to classroom peers)
Where is the bathroom?	You want to know where the bathroom is.

PCIT International, 2011

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CDI: Skills

- **Description:** a statement about the child's moment-to-moment behavior.

Examples:

Adult
I see you shaking your head.
You are bouncing the ball.
You are coloring a flower with the red crayon.
You are putting the two puzzle pieces together.
I see you smiling.

PCIT International, 2011

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CDI: Rules



- Allow child to lead the play
- Avoid commands
- Avoid questions
- Do not criticize child or use negative talk
- Ignore minor misbehavior
- Do not interpret but rather describe behavior
- Be enthusiastic and enjoy your time with the child!

PCIT International, 2011

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Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI)



Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

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VDI: Types of Questions

- Forced-choice
- Open-ended
- Yes/No (Avoid)

Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

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VDI: Types of Questions

- **Forced Choice:** a question in which two or more possible responses are given within the question.

Examples:

- Adult
- Is *pink* or *blue* your favorite color?
- Is this a *butterfly*, a *dog*, or a *cat*?
- Would you rather play on the *swings*, the *slide*, or *you don't know*?
- Do you want to see the movie *Frozen* or *another movie*?
- Did you brush your teeth: *yes* or *no*?

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VDI: Types of Questions

- **Open-Ended:** a question in which a possible answer is not suggested within the question. Typically, this question starts with “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “why,” or “how.”

Examples:

Adult
Who is your best friend?
What did you learn today at school?
Where did you go over the winter break?
When did you go to Hawaii?
Why do you like cookies more than ice cream?
How did you meet your friend Joseph?

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VDI: Types of Questions

- **Yes or No:** a question in which a possible or expected response is either “yes” or “no.” These questions are to be **avoided**.

Examples:

Yes or No Questions (Avoid)	Forced Choice
Do you like seafood?	→ Do you like seafood: <i>yes or no</i> ?
Did you do your homework?	→ Did you <i>do your homework or not yet</i> ?
Have you eaten dessert?	→ Have you <i>eaten dessert or have you not eaten dessert</i> ?
Do you need to go to the bathroom?	→ Do you need to go to the bathroom <i>now or can you wait</i> ?
Did you make it yourself?	→ Did you <i>make it yourself or did someone help you</i> ?
Is the party on December 5 th ?	→ Is the party on <i>December 5th or a different day</i> ?

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VDI: Skills

- Modeling
- Coping Strategies
- Practice
- Contingency Management
- Fade-in
- Shaping
- Exposure

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VDI: Skills 

- **Modeling:** having a child observe another child or adult interacting adaptively with the feared situation; this can be live or filmed.

Example:

Adult Modeling

- Public speaking amongst a crowd (in front of child).
- Expressing to the child coping behavior the adult uses in stressful situations.
- Introducing their self to a stranger (in front of child).
- Ordering food at a restaurant (in front of child).
- Staying calm during fearful situation (in front of child).

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VDI: Skills 

- **Coping Strategies:** relaxation techniques used to aid in dealing with a stressful situation.
 - Pizza Breaths
 - Squeezing Lemons
 - Coping Thoughts

Example:

Coping Thoughts

- I am brave.
- I have done it before, I can do it again.
- The fear will go down.
- It will be worth it.
- When this is over, I'll be glad that I did it.

Coping Cat; Kendall & Hedtke, 2006

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VDI: Skills 

- **Practice:** repeated performance of a structured exercise for the purpose of acquiring skill and habituating to a feared stimuli.

Example:

Child Practice Behavior

- Introducing their self to a stranger.
- Asking a "favorites" question to peers.
- Practicing show-and-tell.
- Asking to use the bathroom in class.
- Ordering food at a restaurant.

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VDI: Skills 

- **Contingency Management:** rewards for brave behaviors.

Example: 

Rewards
Checks on a chart
Stickers
Tokens
Food
Playing time

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VDI: Skills 

- **Fade-in:** gradually introducing a new individual (person child has not verbalized with before) into child's speaking circle. The new individual gets closer in proximity to the child as old individual (person child has verbalized with before) moves further away. Also known as "slide-in."

Example: 

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VDI: Skills 

- **Shaping:** rewarding successive approximations to a desired behavior.

Example:

Adult	Child	Adult
Parent: What is your favorite color?	Pink (while looking at parent).	Thank you for answering me!
Parent: What is your favorite color?	Pink (while looking at parent and parent is closer to new individual, John).	Great job answering me with John close by.
Parent: What is your favorite color?	Pink (while looking at parent and parent is side-by-side with John).	It's wonderful that you used your brave voice with John right by me!
Parent: Please answer my following question while looking at John. What is your favorite color?	Pink (while looking at John).	Nice work answering me while looking at John!
John: What is your favorite color?	Pink (while looking at John).	That was amazing you answered John!

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VDI: Skills



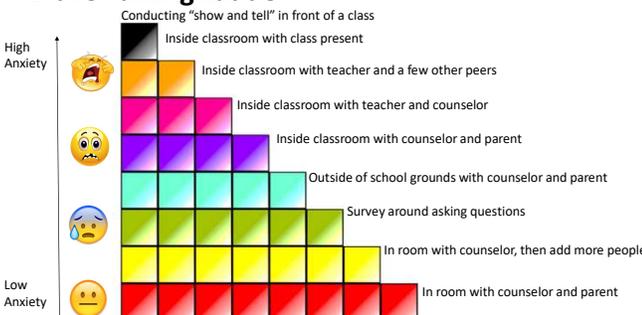
- **Exposure:** having child interact with a feared stimulus, live or recorded.

Example:

Child Verbal Interactions
Asking a stranger for help.
Answering a teacher's question.
Initiating conversation with a peer.
Getting a person's attention.
Expressing feelings to a family member.

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Brave Talking Ladder



High Anxiety	1. Conducting "show and tell" in front of a class
	2. Inside classroom with class present
	3. Inside classroom with teacher and a few other peers
	4. Inside classroom with teacher and counselor
	5. Inside classroom with counselor and parent
	6. Outside of school grounds with counselor and parent
	7. Survey around asking questions
	8. In room with counselor, then add more people
Low Anxiety	9. In room with counselor and parent
	10. In room with parent only

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VDI: Rules

- Avoid yes/no questions (instead, change them to forced-choice questions)
- Allow the opportunity of **5-10 seconds** for the child to answer
- Describe any non-verbal behavior instead of interpreting it
- Repeat the question up to 3 times, move on if the child does not answer
- If the child struggles to respond, practice with them in a separate space

Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

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VDI: Rules

- If the child still struggles to respond, return to the last situation they were successful in answering a question
- Revisit the question later if necessary, never leave a question unanswered
- If child only whispers to an individual while in a group setting, the individual should reflect aloud to others what child said
- Always use CDI skills (during CDI and VDI phases)

Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

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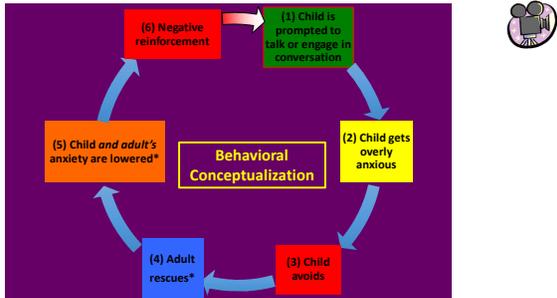
VDI: Rules

Examples:

Adult	
Avoid yes/no questions	Do you want to eat this, <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> ? (← forced choice)
Allow 5-10 seconds	How was school today? (5 seconds) How was school today?
Describe non-verbal behavior, do not interpret	I see you're shaking your head. Does that mean <i>you're hungry</i> or <i>you're not hungry</i> ?
Repeat question up to 3 times	What is your favorite color? (5 seconds) Is your favorite color <i>blue</i> or <i>something else</i> ? (5 seconds) Is your favorite color <i>blue</i> , <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> ?
Practice in a separate space	Let's step outside just you and I and we can practice answering this question.
Return to previous situation child was successful	It may be hard for you to answer that question right now. I know you were able to tell Sabrina your favorite color a few minutes ago. Go practice with her and I will ask you this question afterward.
Revisit question later	That's okay. Think about the answer and I will ask you that question later.
Always use CDI skills	I really like how you are making eye-contact with me. What is your name?

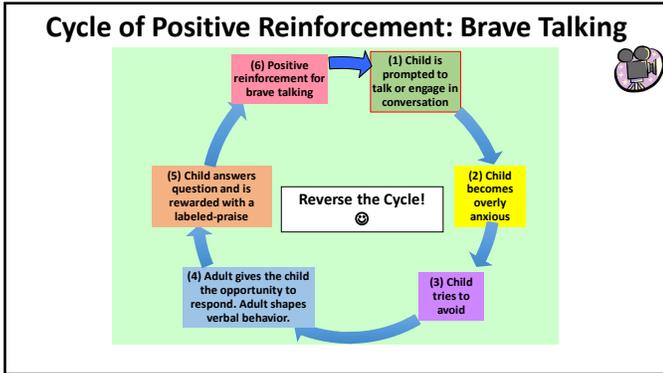
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Cycle of Negative Reinforcement: Selective Mutism



Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

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Additional Tips for Teachers

- Conduct a fade-in procedure in collaboration with the parent and child as soon as possible
 - May take multiple practices – twice a week preferable
 - At first, practice when other children are not present in the school, then transition to including more children
- If child whispers to teacher only, the teacher should reflect aloud to others
- Use contingency management within the classroom, particularly focused on brave-talking with the child
 - Some children may require high frequency reinforcers
 - Great to integrate into system already being used in the classroom
 - Daily communication with home very helpful at first, faded out over time

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Additional Tips for Teachers

- When allotting classroom jobs, give the child a job that involves speaking
- Do not allow others to speak for the child or label child as not able to speak
- Appropriately reward brave talking without overwhelming child with too much praise (especially in front of other classmates – some may need understated praise)
- May help to read a book about SM to class or any book that talks about that all kids feel scared sometimes (some suggestions at the end of presentation)

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Additional Tips for Teachers

- Child may create audio recording to present to teacher and/or class
 - May benefit child to have teacher or parent play the recording first without child present as to explain what is occurring to the class and how best to respond to the child
 - Explain that we all feel scared about something
 - Be supportive, smile, and if you don't hear the child, ask the child to speak-up!
 - Child may then play the recording so child is responsible for others hearing his/her voice
- Communicate with parents any difficulties the child may have at school

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Good Books for the Classroom



Sophie's Story (Joffe) Charlie's Choices (Moldan) Maya's Voice (Cheng) My friend Daniel doesn't talk (Longo)

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Helpful Resources

- www.selectivemutism.org
- www.selectivemutismnetwork.org
- www.childanxiety.net

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Helpful Resources



Aimee Kotrba: Selective Mutism: An Assessment and Intervention Guide for Therapists, Educators, & Parents

Angela McHolm: Helping your Child with Selective Mutism

Christopher Kearney: Helping Children with Selective Mutism and Their Parents

Ruth Perednik: The Selective Mutism Guide

Deborah Beidel & Samuel Turner: Childhood Anxiety Disorders

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Helpful Resources

Growing up Brave, Donna Pincus

You and Your Anxious Child: Free Your Child from Fears and Worries and Create a Joyful Family Life, Anne Marie Albano and Leslie Pepper

Helping your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents, Ronald Rapee, Anne Wignall, Susan Spence, Heidi Lyneham, Vanessa Cobhanm

Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child, Katharina Manassis

Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias, Tamar E. Chansky

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