



How Should I Interact with a Child Who Has Selective Mutism? Tips and Tricks for Everyone.

Trying to understand the silence of a child with selective mutism can seem like a mystery, but it's even more challenging to know the best way to interact with them. The way you approach a child with selective mutism can have a great impact on whether or not they speak to you. Every child is different, but here are a few tips that everyone can use.

Don't take it personally

When a child with selective mutism isn't speaking to you, it may appear that they are being rude or defiant. The truth is that they would very much like to speak, but they can't. Some children with selective mutism describe how their throat gets tight and they cannot force a sound out. Others find the feelings of panic and anxiety make it hard to think of what they are going to say. Instead of feeling sad or frustrated that the child won't speak to you, focus on showing the child that you love and care for them whether they are speaking or not. Build a relationship of trust with them first with no expectation or pressure to speak. Remember that "Hello, goodbye, please, and thank-you" are some of the hardest things for children with selective mutism to say.

Allow for warm-up time

Always give the child time to warm-up before trying to interact with them and engage them in conversation. I know it sounds strange, but actually ignoring the child at first puts them in the position of control and then they can approach and engage when they feel ready. As much as you want to, please do not run up and hug the child, get down close to their face and look them in the eye, or begin asking questions right away. After a little while, when the child has relaxed and appears comfortable, then you can start conversing. Allow the child to watch, listen, and observe you first.

Avoid direct questions

It may be hard to resist the urge to ask the child questions, since questions are such a natural way to start a conversation. But for the child with selective mutism, questions are very anxiety provoking and can shut down communication before it even starts. Once the child has relaxed or shown interest in you, stop ignoring them and start observing. Describe aloud what the child is doing without speaking directly to them. This helps the child get used to you without feeling threatened. You might even find that the child offers an answer if you phrase a question as a statement, "I wonder what Sally's favorite color is" or if you ask a question to a toy, "Stuffed animal, what is your name?"



Don't make a big deal when you hear the child speak

Of course you are going to be thrilled to hear the child speak, but don't show it. Don't tell them from across the room, "I heard you!" That would really embarrass them. Act as if they have always spoken to you and it's no big deal. It is okay to repeat what the child said and say a quick and matter-of-fact "thank-you" or "good job for telling me" but then move right along. Many children are afraid of the reaction people will have when their voice is heard for the first time. They don't want to draw attention to themselves and if people are getting really excited about them talking they may literally run and hide and make sure their voice isn't heard again!

Never speak for the child or label them as the child who doesn't talk

A child with selective mutism can quickly be forced into a pigeonhole that is very difficult to break out of when other people begin to answer for them and they become labeled as the child that doesn't speak. Don't jump in and answer for the child when they are silent. That just reinforces to the child the fact that they can't speak and someone needs to do it for them. Allowing them to respond, even in a non-verbal way is better than answering for them. Often times, other children will try to help by calling out an answer for the mute child and explaining that they don't talk, but this should not be allowed. At times, as a step toward answering verbally, a friend may be used to relay an answer, but in this case the child tells the friend what to say and the friend repeats it to the group.

Ask the child's parents how you can help

As a child works to overcome selective mutism, they progress through different levels of communication. Sometimes it is appropriate to encourage head nodding or pointing. However, if the child is working on being verbal, asking the child to point or nod may undermine their progress. At times asking lots of targeted forced choice questions can be beneficial, but if the child is working on initiating conversation, asking too many questions may not give the child an opportunity to ask their own. If possible, before you interact with the child ask their parents what the child is working on and how to help. Finding out a little bit about the child's interests and personality will also help you to know how to connect with them on a personal level.

Most of all, be patient with the child and don't give up on them. It takes many small steps over time to see improvement and they will benefit from your encouragement, love, and belief in their ability to overcome their fear of speaking.