



# How to Ask a Question to a Child with Selective Mutism

Questions can make children with selective mutism (SM) anxious, but sometimes questions cannot be avoided. At some point the child reaches a stage when they are ready to practice answering questions. There are certain ways to ask questions that reduce the child's anxiety and make it easier for them to answer.

## Indirect Questions

Indirect questioning takes the pressure off the child. There is no expectation to answer since the question is not posed to them. In some cases the child will offer the answer as soon as the pressure is off them. A good way to pose an indirect question is by using an "I wonder" phrase. "I wonder if Sam wants orange juice or apple juice." You can also try directing the question to a toy or another person.

When my children are all together they love to answer for each other – despite my efforts to teach them that it's rude! Sometimes this works in our favor. I told the doctor once that if she wanted to get an answer from my daughter that she should ask my son the question instead and my daughter would be sure to jump in and answer for him. That's exactly what happened. Although I don't normally encourage this, it can help take the pressure off and get everyone speaking freely in anxiety provoking situations.

## Forced Choice Questions

Some children have a hard time thinking clearly when they feel anxious. Having choices presented to them in the question can make it a lot less stressful for them. Forced choice questions provide two or three options for the child to choose from. "Would you like the blue marker or the red marker?" If there is a possibility that neither of the choices would do, you could also add "or something else" to the options. Almost any question can be phrased as a forced choice question. We use this type of question the most.

## Yes/No Questions

In general, yes/no questions are discouraged when trying to get a verbal response. When given the opportunity, children with SM will almost always give a head nod/shake instead of saying the words yes or no. However, if the nonverbal child is using gestures as they work their way up their speaking ladder, sometimes asking yes/no questions would be an appropriate step.

Yes/no questions can always be rephrased as forced choice questions. For example, instead of asking "Are you in first grade?" you can ask "Are you in first grade or second grade?" Instead of asking "Are you ready to go?" you can ask "Are you ready to go, or would you like to stay longer?"



## Open Ended Questions

In open ended questions the child is free to come up with whatever answer they wish. This can be quite overwhelming. Wait until the child is comfortable answering forced choice questions before moving on to open ended questions. If the child is unable to answer an open ended question, rephrase it as a forced choice question.

## Examples

**Indirect:** I wonder what game David wants to play.

**Yes/No:** Do you want to play Go Fish?

**Forced Choice:** Do you want to play Go Fish or Memory or something else?

**Open Ended:** What game do you want to play today?

**Indirect:** I wonder if Annie likes to dance.

**Yes/No:** Do you like to dance?

**Forced Choice:** Do you like to dance or do you not like to dance?

**Open Ended:** What kind of dancing do you like?

## Tips

- After asking a question wait at least 5 seconds for a response. If no response is given, restate the question and wait another 5 seconds. If still no response, rephrase the question or move to an easier type of question (from open ended to forced choice, or from forced choice to yes/no).
- Avoid direct eye contact while questioning the child as this makes them more nervous.
- Repeat or echo what the child says and give labeled praise to reinforce the verbal response. "You're in first grade. Thanks for telling me."
- Don't get overly excited when the child answers. Act like you normally would when any other person speaks to you.
- If the child is unable to answer you directly, they may be able to give their answer to a friend or parent who can then relay the answer to you. While you stand by listening, have the friend or parent restate your question to the child and get a verbal response.
- In a group situation, sometimes taking the child aside one-on-one will make it possible for them to give their answer.
- Some children are able to speak through a stuffed animal or toy, using it like a puppet.
- Try not to let questions go unanswered. This will reinforce the child's avoidance of answering. Make sure that the child is relaxed and comfortable with you and the situation before asking direct questions.
- Save an unanswered question and try again later when the child is less stressed.
- Show your confidence in the child's ability to speak. If they are unable to answer after several attempts say something like, "I know you are thinking about what you want to say and you'll share it when you are ready. We will try again later."