


by Psyched Services

Special Considerations for Maximizing Student Success: Addressing Selective Mutism

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Training Guidelines

To get the most out of this training, please take a moment to review the following guidelines:

- Download all training materials prior to starting video
- Have pen and paper ready
- Learn, so that you can *do*!

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Learning Objectives

- Learn the origin, contributing factors, and manifestations within the school environment of selective mutism.
- Explore methods and tools for assessment of selective mutism.
- Learn a range of evidence-based strategies tailored to help students with selective mutism engage more fully in the educational environment.
- Learn ways to promote social interactions, self-expression, and confidence while also providing guidance to teachers and peers on how to offer meaningful support.

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Defining Selective Mutism

What is Selective Mutism?

- Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder in which individuals consistently fail to speak in specific social situations where speech is expected.
- This goes beyond shyness and is not due to a lack of knowledge or comfort with the spoken language.



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Prevalence and Demographics

How Common is Selective Mutism?

- Selective mutism is not as rare as once believed.
- It often begins in early childhood and can persist into adolescence if left untreated.
- Prevalence varies, but it's estimated to affect around 1 in 100 children.
- It can impact individuals of all backgrounds and ethnicities.

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Differentiating Selective Mutism from Other Communication Disorders



- Selective mutism is distinct from other speech or language disorders.
- It's characterized by consistent mutism in specific settings, while the individual can speak freely in more comfortable environments.
- It's important to differentiate selective mutism from conditions like autism spectrum disorders or social anxiety, which may share some features but require different treatment approaches.

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Consistency in Specific Settings


Selective mutism means consistently not speaking in certain places, even though the person can talk in places where they feel comfortable. This is different from speech or language disorders, which affect communication in many different situations.



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Environmental Context

Selective mutism depends on the situation. People with it can talk at home or places they like, but in places like school or parties, where they feel pressured to talk, they can become silent. This sets it apart from other disorders.



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Possible Causes and Origins

- Selective mutism's exact cause is not pinpointed, but research suggests various factors contributing to its development.
- A combination of genetic, environmental, and psychological elements is believed to play a role.



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Role of Anxiety and Shyness

- Anxiety is a central factor in selective mutism. The fear of speaking in specific social situations can be overwhelming.
- Shyness, a natural personality trait, can exacerbate anxiety and contribute to the condition.
- Understanding these factors is vital for effective intervention and support.



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Understanding Selective Mutism vs. Other Conditions

Selective mutism is a complex condition that often shares some common features with other speech and communication disorders, such as autism spectrum disorders and social anxiety. It's essential to differentiate Selective Mutism from these conditions because it impacts the choice of intervention strategies and treatment approaches.



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Differential Diagnosis with Autism Spectrum Disorders


Autism and selective mutism may share similar social communication issues, but there's a key difference. Autism often means ongoing problems with communication in various situations, while selective mutism mainly affects specific situations. It's important to tell them apart for the right diagnosis and treatment.




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Differentiating from Social Anxiety

Social anxiety and selective mutism are alike because they both involve anxiety in social situations. But the main difference is that in selective mutism, people often stay silent, while in social anxiety, they might avoid or feel very uncomfortable in social situations. Though both conditions can be helped with therapy, the treatment approaches are not the same.






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Differentiating from the Bilingual Silent Period

The Bilingual Silent Period often occurs during the early stages of language acquisition. In this phase, children may be fully capable of understanding and using both languages but choose not to speak one. The silence is often context-dependent, meaning it might be more prevalent in certain language contexts, like speaking the less dominant language. Importantly, this silence is not anxiety-driven but rather a natural part of language development.



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Differentiating Selective Mutism



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Is it Selective Mutism?

Tyler, age 4, is shy for the first few weeks of school and prefers to only talk to his friends.




NO.
This is a typical behavior for children, especially when they are new to preschool. It's common for them to feel more comfortable talking to their friends than to adults initially. We should give Tyler a bit more time to adjust before assuming there is a problem.

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Is it Selective Mutism?

Rosie, age 5, talks to her mother and friends on the playground but never talks to or in front of adults in school, even after the 1st semester.



POSSIBLY.
Rosie exhibits the ability to speak freely in certain situations, while remaining silent in others. This pattern is atypical for children and should be further investigated.

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Is it Selective Mutism?

Suzanne, age 6, will nod her head and give single-word answers but does not talk to anyone other than this.



POSSIBLY.
Even though Suzanne talks sometimes, she does not talk freely in school, which is a possible sign of anxiety and warrants follow-up.

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Is it Selective Mutism?

Michael, age 9, recently arrived from Argentina and does not speak any English. He does not attempt to talk or say any words.



NOT LIKELY.
It is more likely that Michael needs some time to feel comfortable, as he has just arrived and is expected to speak a new language. It may take a few months for him to gain the confidence to start speaking.

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Recognizing Selective Mutism in Students

- **Consistent Silence:** Students with selective mutism consistently avoid verbal communication in specific school-related situations.
- **Limited Eye Contact:** They may struggle to make eye contact with teachers and peers.
- **Physical Signs of Anxiety:** Signs such as blushing, sweating, or trembling may be evident when they are expected to speak.



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Recognizing Selective Mutism in Students


- **Difficulty Initiating Speech:** They might find it challenging to initiate conversations or respond to questions verbally.
- **Communication Through Nods and Gestures:** Students may resort to nonverbal communication, like nodding or gesturing, instead of speaking.
- **Rare Display of Speech:** When they do speak, it's usually in more comfortable settings or with select individuals.



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Common Challenges

- Academic Implications: Selective mutism can impact a student's ability to participate in class discussions and presentations and even to respond to teachers' questions.
- Social Challenges: The condition may hinder their social interactions and lead to difficulties in making friends.
- Educator Awareness: Educators may not always be aware of the condition, which can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation of the student's behavior.
- Stress and Anxiety: Students with selective mutism often experience heightened stress and anxiety in school environments, which can further hinder their academic and social development.



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Video 1




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Selective Mutism

What common misconceptions of selective mutism did Reagan's mother talk about?

How would you go about addressing these misconceptions in your school?



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Why Early Recognition Matters

- **Optimal Outcomes:** Identifying selective mutism in its early stages allows for timely intervention, increasing the chances of positive outcomes.
- **Academic Progress:** Early identification can help prevent academic setbacks and promote a smoother educational journey.
- **Emotional Well-being:** Recognizing selective mutism early can lead to better emotional well-being for the student and reduce anxiety-related stress.



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DSM-V Criteria

- According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition, to be diagnosed with selective mutism, an individual must meet the following criteria:
 - Consistent failure to speak in specific social situations in which there is an expectation for speaking (e.g., at school) despite speaking in other situations.
 - The disturbance interferes with educational or occupational achievement or with social communication.
 - The duration of the disturbance is at least 1 month (not limited to the first month of school).
 - The failure to speak is not attributable to a lack of knowledge of, or comfort with, the spoken language required in the social situation.
 - The disturbance is not better explained by a communication disorder (e.g., stuttering) and does not occur exclusively during the course of autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, or another psychotic disorder.



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School-Based Assessment

- Remember - In a school setting, our role is not to provide diagnoses. Instead, we assess eligibility for special education services based on the guidelines set forth by IDEA.
- Comprehensive evaluation is required, including assessment by a school psychologist, speech pathologist, and education specialist.
- Interviews with parents, caregivers, and teachers can provide valuable insights into the student's communication patterns.
- Observing the student in various school situations helps identify the specific contexts where selective mutism manifests.



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Assessment Framework

- There are four key assessment areas that should be covered:
 - The student's speaking habits.
 - How the selective mutism is being managed at home and in school.
 - The student's speech, language, and cognitive profile - consider starting with a nonverbal assessment and gradually adding verbal components as the student becomes more comfortable with you.
 - The student's social/emotional/behavioral profile.



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Assessment Tools

- **Selective Mutism Questionnaire**
 - This is a parent-report questionnaire that assesses the severity and characteristics of selective mutism symptoms.
 - Available online from the Selective Mutism Association
 - Free to use
- **Selective Mutism Anxiety Rating Scale (SMARS)**
 - This rating scale measures anxiety symptoms specifically related to selective mutism and can be completed by parents, teachers, or clinicians.
 - Can be found in the book "Selective Mutism: An Assessment and Intervention Guide for Therapists, Educators, and Parents" by Aimee Rotrba.



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Assessment Tools

- **Social Communication Anxiety Inventory (SCAI)**
 - This self-report inventory assesses social anxiety symptoms, including those related to selective mutism, in children and adolescents.
 - Available at the Selective Mutism Center website
 - Free to use
- **Frankfurt Scale of Selective Mutism (FSSM)**
 - This caregiver questionnaire asks questions about everyday situations in a child's life. It is separated into age ranges for preschool (3-7), school age (8-11), and adolescent (12-18).
 - Available online from the Selective Mutism Association
 - Free to use



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Assessment

- As with any psychoeducational evaluation, an assessment of a student with selective mutism should involve:
 - Detailed background information
 - Observations in the classroom and in unstructured social settings
 - Rating scales, including ones targeting anxiety
 - Interview information from parents and teachers
 - Consider a structured interview and include information on the student's speaking habits



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Eligibility Considerations

Speech or Language Impairment (SLI):

This category can be appropriate if the selective mutism significantly impacts the student's ability to communicate effectively in an educational setting. While selective mutism is not a speech or language disorder in the traditional sense, it can severely inhibit verbal communication, which is central to this category.



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Eligibility Considerations


Emotional Disturbance (ED): Selective mutism is often rooted in high social anxiety. If the student's condition is primarily driven by anxiety or other emotional factors that adversely affect educational performance, they might qualify under this category. This category is fitting when the mutism is part of a broader pattern of emotional or behavioral issues.



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Eligibility Considerations


Other Health Impairment (OHI): This category encompasses conditions that limit a child's strength, energy, or alertness, including heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that result in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment. Since selective mutism is often associated with anxiety disorders, it may fit into the OHI category.

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Eligibility Considerations

Specific Learning Disability (SLD): In some cases, selective mutism may be associated with specific learning challenges, particularly if the anxiety and communication challenges significantly interfere with the student's ability to learn and demonstrate learning in standard ways. However, this is less common and would require a clear demonstration of a learning disability alongside selective mutism.

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Video 2



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Meeting the Student

Working with a student with selective mutism, especially for the first time, requires patience, understanding, and a gentle approach. Here are some strategies to consider.


- **Create a Comfortable Environment:** Start by ensuring the environment is quiet, nonthreatening, and comfortable. Limit the number of people present to avoid overwhelming the student.
- **Nonverbal Communication:** Begin with nonverbal communication, like smiling, nodding, and using gestures. This can help establish a connection without pressuring the student to speak.



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Meeting the Student


- **Use Simple Language:** When you do speak, use simple, clear language. Avoid complex sentences or questions that might be difficult for the student to process under stress.
- **Avoid Direct Pressure to Speak:** Don't put direct pressure on the student to speak. Questions that require a verbal response might increase anxiety. Instead, allow them to nod or shake their head or use other nonverbal methods to communicate.



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Meeting the Student

- **Use Indirect Interaction:** Engage in parallel activities where the focus is not on the student speaking. For example, reading a book near them, drawing, or playing a quiet game. This can help reduce anxiety.
- **Be Patient and Accepting:** Show that you accept them as they are, whether they speak or not. Patience is key; pressure or frustration from your end can exacerbate the situation.



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Meeting the Student

- **Encourage Small Steps:** Celebrate nonverbal interactions and small achievements in communication. Gradually, as the student becomes more comfortable, they might start to interact more.
- **Follow the Student's Lead:** Pay attention to the student's comfort level and adjust your approach accordingly. If they seem overwhelmed, give them space and try again later.



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Reassuring the Student

- Make the following points during your initial meeting with the student:
 - **There is no pressure to speak.** They should be aware that others recognize it can be challenging for them to communicate with new people, and they can choose to speak when they feel at ease. There is no requirement for them to do so if they do not wish to.
 - **They are not alone.** They should be informed that there are other children who have experienced the same thing, and they are not the only ones facing this challenge.

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Reassuring the Student



- Make the following points during your initial meeting with the student:
 - Their difficulty in talking will not last forever.
 - It is not surprising that they found it challenging to speak when they went to school. Schools are big and quite different from home, which can be overwhelming for them.
 - If appropriate, add that it must have been especially difficult not speaking English very well, or being in a strange country, or having difficulty talking clearly, or whatever applies to the student.

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Evidence-Based Strategies

Gradual Exposure: Gradually exposing the student to speaking situations in a controlled and supportive manner is effective. This can start with nonverbal communication, progress to whispering or speaking to one person, and then slowly expand to speaking in small groups.



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Evidence-Based Strategies

Behavioral Interventions: Using positive reinforcement techniques can encourage verbal participation. This includes praising the student for any attempt at communication, even nonverbal. Setting up a reward system for communication attempts can also be effective.



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Evidence-Based Strategies


Family Involvement: Involving the family in the treatment process is crucial. Educating the family about selective mutism and how they can support the student at home can create a consistent, supportive environment.



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Evidence-Based Strategies


Collaboration with Service Providers: Close collaboration with speech therapists, school psychologists, or other specialists who are working with the student is essential. By working together, we can develop tailored strategies specific to the student's needs.



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Evidence-Based Strategies

Structured Activities: Providing structured activities where the student can participate without the need for verbal communication initially. This includes group work, art projects, or computer-based activities.






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Evidence-Based Strategies



Consistent School-Home Communication: Regular communication between school and home helps in monitoring the student's progress and ensuring consistency in approaches and expectations.



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School Staff Education


- Learn About Selective Mutism: Teach teachers what selective mutism is and how it impacts students.
- Communication Techniques: Train teachers in nonverbal communication methods.
- Supportive Classroom Environment: Guide teachers on creating a safe, pressure-free classroom.
- Adapt Classroom Activities: Teach how to modify class tasks and discussions to include the student.
- Positive Reinforcement: Educate teachers on using praise and rewards to encourage participation.



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School Staff Education

- Teach Classmates: Show how to educate other students about selective mutism to build support.
- Anxiety Management: Provide strategies for helping the student manage anxiety in class.
- Monitor Progress: Teach how to track the student's improvements and adjust approaches.
- Handle Setbacks: Prepare teachers for potential challenges and how to respond.
- Use Resources: Inform about resources like books or websites on selective mutism.



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Downloadables - Infographic and Teacher Tip Sheet



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What is Selective Mutism?

Reading the Silence

- Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder characterized by a consistent failure to speak in specific social situations despite being capable of speaking in other settings.

Contributing Factors

- Anxiety: Selective mutism is often linked to social anxiety and fear of speaking in certain situations.
- Temperament: Shyness, sensitivity, and introversion may contribute to the development of selective mutism.
- Environmental Factors: Traumatic experiences, language barriers, or a lack of social interaction can also play a role.

Signs and Symptoms

- Refusal to speak in specific situations (e.g., school, public places).
- Frequent or increasing extreme anxiety when asked to speak.
- Difficulty making eye contact or participating in social interactions.
- Physical symptoms like rapid heart rate, sweating, or trembling.

Impact on Education

- Academic Challenges: Selective mutism can hinder participation, communication, and learning progress.
- Social Isolation: Children with selective mutism may struggle to form friendships and feel isolated from their peers.
- Emotional Well-Being: The isolation and anxiety associated with selective mutism can impact a child's self-esteem and overall well-being.

Assessment and Diagnosis

- A comprehensive assessment by a qualified professional is necessary to diagnose selective mutism.
- Diagnosis may involve interviews, observations, and questionnaires to gather information from parents, teachers, and the student.

Strategies for Support

- Classroom Exposure: Gradually exposing the student to anxiety-provoking situations can help them build confidence and overcome their fear.
- Communication Alternatives: Implementing alternative forms of communication, such as writing, drawing, or using technology, can provide a means of expression.
- Collaboration: Collaborating between parents, educators, and mental health professionals is crucial to develop individualized strategies and support plans.
- Creating a Supportive Environment:
 - Establish Trust: Building awareness and providing understanding among classmates can foster empathy and support.
 - Encourage Positivity: Encourage positive and reinforcing feedback from teachers, peers, and family members, allowing the student to progress at their own pace.
 - Celebrate Progress: Recognize and celebrate small achievements to boost the student's confidence and motivation.

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What is Selective Mutism?

Selective mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder characterized by a consistent inability to speak in specific social situations, despite being capable of speaking in other settings. This condition often affects children, but it can also occur in adolescents and adults.

Key Characteristics of Selective Mutism

- Compulsive: Children with SM consistently struggle to speak in certain situations but may be verbally fluent in others. The pattern is not due to a lack of knowledge or inability to communicate.
- Anxiety: The fear of speaking often leads to physical symptoms like rapid heart rate, sweating, or trembling, making it a highly distressing experience.
- Persistent: SM is a long-lasting condition that can persist for several months or even years if not addressed.

Recognizing Students with Selective Mutism

- Observe: Teachers and staff may notice a student's refusal to speak in specific situations, such as during class discussions or group activities.
- Parental Input: Parents may report that their child speaks at home but is silent at school.
- Teacher's Perspective: Teachers may notice a student's social withdrawal or reluctance to participate in class.
- Student's Experience: The student may express feelings of extreme anxiety or fear when asked to speak.
- Communication Alternatives: The student may use non-verbal communication, such as writing or drawing, to express their thoughts.
- Collaboration: Working with the student's parents and other professionals (e.g., school counselor) is essential for a comprehensive assessment and support plan.
- Behavioral Support:
 - Establish a Safe Space: Create a quiet space where the student can feel comfortable and supported.
 - Build Confidence: Encourage the student to participate in low-pressure activities, such as reading aloud or sharing their work.
 - Model Social Interaction: Demonstrate positive social behavior in the classroom.
 - Encourage Peer Support: Encourage classmates to provide support and encouragement.
 - Behavioral Goals: Set realistic, achievable goals for the student's communication progress.

Conclusion

Selective mutism is a challenging condition, but with understanding, patience, and the right support, students with SM can make progress in their communication skills and thrive in the classroom. As a teacher, playing a pivotal role in creating a supportive environment for these students is crucial.

Resources

- Selective Mutism Association: <https://selectivemutism.org/>
- International Society for Selective Mutism: <https://www.selectivemutism.org/>
- Autism and Dyspraxia Association of America (ADAA): <https://adaa.org/>

Note: This document is for informational purposes only and does not constitute a professional advice. Please consult with appropriate professionals for individualized guidance.

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Communication Alternatives

- Picture Cards:** Use images for the student to point at to communicate.
- Writing:** Let the student write down their thoughts or answers.
- Sign Language:** Teach simple sign language or gestures for basic communication.
- Drawing:** Allow the student to draw to express themselves.
- Choice Boards:** Present options on a board for the student to choose from by pointing.
- Flashcards:** Use cards with words or phrases for the student to show their response.

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Communication Alternatives

- **Communication Apps:** Utilize apps that enable nonverbal communication.
- **Body Language:** Recognize and respond to the student's body language and facial expressions.
- **Interactive Whiteboards:** Use whiteboards for the student to write or draw responses.
- **Email/Texting:** For older students, use electronic messaging for communication.
- **Visual Schedules:** Provide visual representations of daily routines and activities.
- **Response Cards:** Use cards for simple responses like 'yes' or 'no', or to indicate choices.



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Peer Involvement

- **Buddy System:** Pair the student with a friendly classmate for company and support.
- **Role-Playing:** Have peers and the student play out social scenarios in a relaxed setting.
- **Group Projects:** Involve the student in team activities where they can contribute without needing to speak.
- **Peer-Led Fun Activities:** Let classmates lead enjoyable activities like art or games that do not require talking.
- **Communication Games:** Play games like charades or Pictionary that use nonverbal communication.



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Peer Involvement

- **Reading Buddies:** Pair the student with a classmate for shared reading time.
- **Nonverbal Communication Encouragement:** Encourage classmates to communicate with gestures or notes.
- **Peer Modeling:** Have peers demonstrate good classroom behavior, like taking turns.
- **Lunch or Recess Companions:** Arrange for a small group to join the student during lunch or recess.
- **Peer Awareness and Education:** Teach peers about selective mutism so they understand and can help.



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Counseling Sessions

- **Drawing and Art Activities:** Engage the student in drawing, painting, or other art activities. This allows for expression without the need for verbal communication. You can discuss the art piece using nonverbal cues, or ask them to write about their artwork if they are comfortable.
- **Play:** Using toys, dolls, or puppets can be a non-threatening way for the student to express themselves. Puppetry can be particularly effective, as the student can project their voice onto an inanimate object, reducing the pressure to speak directly.



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Counseling Sessions

- **Music:** Listening to music or creating music can be a soothing and expressive activity. You can discuss emotions associated with different types of music or create simple rhythms together.
- **Storytelling with Pictures:** Use picture cards to tell a story. The student can arrange the cards in order to create a narrative. This can later progress to writing captions for the pictures or narrating the story in whispers.



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Counseling Sessions

- **Relaxation and Breathing Exercises:** Teach the student relaxation techniques like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or guided imagery. These techniques can help manage anxiety, which is often a significant component of selective mutism.
- **Board Games and Puzzles:** Playing simple board games or doing puzzles can build rapport without requiring much verbal communication. It's a way to engage in a shared activity where the focus is not on talking.



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Counseling Sessions

- **Writing or Journaling:** If the student is comfortable with writing, encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings through journaling. This can be a private way for them to communicate with you.
- **Role-Play:** Engage in role-play scenarios using dolls or action figures. This can help the student express themselves and work through social situations in a low-pressure environment.



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Counseling Sessions

- **Sensory Activities:** Activities that involve different senses (like Play-Doh, sand trays, or water play) can be calming and offer a way to engage the student without the need for verbal interaction.
- **Technology-Assisted Communication:** Use tablets or computers for interactive games or apps that encourage expression. This can also include typing out responses or using speech-generating devices.



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Counseling Sessions

- **Silent Reading Time:** Sharing a book or having a quiet reading time can be a bonding activity. Gradually, you can ask them to point to words or pictures, and eventually read out loud in a whisper.
- **Nonverbal Communication Games:** Games that focus on nonverbal communication skills, such as charades or Pictionary, can be fun and engaging while still encouraging expressive skills.



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Conclusion

Today we discussed:

- Understanding Selective Mutism
- Assessment Methods
- Evidence-Based Strategies
- Promoting Social Interaction and Confidence
- Guidance for Teachers and Peers



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Next Steps

- If you have students with selective mutism that you serve, consider:
 - Providing training and awareness sessions for teachers who may work with the student.
 - Use the Selective Mutism Infographic and Teacher Tip Sheets to help school staff understand selective mutism.
 - Develop or enhance peer education programs to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for students with selective mutism. Encourage empathy and understanding among students.

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