

# QUIET CHILDREN

There are different reasons why a child may not speak to practitioners or peers, but all require us to provide our support, as **Michael Jones** explains...



## Why are children quiet?

The most important thing we can do for children who are very quiet is to find out how they feel. Many children are quiet when they first leave their parents to attend a group, but most soon find their confidence and become talkative with adults and then with other children. However, many very quiet children are uncertain about what to do, how to behave and how to talk to other people. They are particularly uncertain about how to talk with adults and other children when they are away from their parents. Initially they may be more aware than other children about high noise levels, how fast some children move around, and are confused by having so many activities to choose from. This can make them feel overwhelmed. One of their biggest uncertainties is about how to use talk to gain an adult's attention, and keep the adult focused on them when more confident children want to talk as well.

## Selective mutism

Using the term *elective mute* implies that a child is choosing to be silent. Children do not choose to be silent, but their response is invariably an automatic reaction to a situation that makes them feel very uncomfortable. Nowadays the term *selective mutism* is used to describe children who have developed a dread of speaking when away from their family. The children feel physically unable to talk in certain situations, even though they are confident talkers at home with familiar adults. Children with selective mutism are extremely worried that they will be made to speak in front of other people. Their fear is so great that they find themselves avoiding

**T**hree-and-a-half-year-old Magda has been attending preschool for six months, but the adults have yet to hear her speak to them in the setting. She is just beginning to whisper to a few other children when playing outdoors, but clams up if she thinks an adult is watching or might be about to approach her. Magda has started to play alongside other children in the role-play area but is often to be seen silently watching them from a distance. Magda talks loudly to her mother as soon as she is round the corner from the setting and

because of this the adults have stopped describing her as shy, and now use words like *stubborn*, and even *manipulative and controlling*. Some staff are discussing whether or not Magda is an *elective mute*, and have started to use this phrase when talking about her. It is quite understandable that the adults, when faced with a child like Magda, should be very concerned because she is not talking – particularly when they know that she is a confident talker elsewhere. However, none of their assumptions are accurate. So how can we support everyone to understand Magda's behaviour and help her become a confident talker?

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speaking, and in some cases become so frozen with fear that they are unable to move. This extreme anxiety condition is relatively uncommon, though practitioners are likely to meet at least one child in their professional career who has been diagnosed as having selective mutism.

### Being shy

Many quiet children are shy. Shy children feel very uncomfortable in new situations, with unfamiliar adults and children, or when asked to take part in new activities when other people are watching them. However, they become able to join in and talk if they are given the chance to practise new activities, and once they get to know and trust adults and other children. Shy children are more concerned than confident children about making 'mistakes'. They have a particular worry that adults and other children may think negatively about what they might do or say. Shy children do not actively choose to opt out of activities where they feel uncomfortable, but are overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and embarrassment: including blushing, sweating, wanting to cry and having an urge to run away or hide.

Most adults have these feelings at one time or another so can be sympathetic towards shy children. The difficulty for children with selective mutism, on the other hand, is that they have learned to internalise their feelings and may develop a fixed smile, which gives adults the impression that they are happy and are just refusing to join in. We can differentiate

between shy children and those with selective mutism by the way that they react over time. With sensitive support and encouragement, shy children become more confident about joining in and talking. Those with selective mutism do not make this spontaneous progress and are likely to need support from an outside professional such as a speech and language therapist, to help the family, staff and child work together on a specific programme.

### Additional languages

Children who are learning an additional language often go through a silent period when first learning a language. This is an active phase, when children are listening out for important information such as when one word ends and another one begins, and for familiar words that help them make sense of what is being said. Most children emerge from this phase as chatty and confident speakers of their new language. Magda was in fact shy and learning to speak English. Because she was worried about making mistakes, and was unsure about how to get involved in play with other children, she was missing out on practising talking, which made her feel more anxious. However she benefited from the strategies and support outlined below.

### Supporting Magda involved...

- Talking positively about her. Instead of saying, "That's our elective mute", all staff agreed to say, "This is Magda. We know she talks

confidently at home, and we are helping her find her confidence here."

- Planning to repeat her favourite activities, because quiet children benefit from repeating activities until they feel confident that they can do them.
- Assigning a key person to spend time with Magda, e.g. sharing books and playing in the role-play area.
- Encouraging her to play and talk with other children by helping Magda to do activities in pairs – e.g. completing a puzzle or giving out the cups at snack-time.
- Avoiding making children answer their name at registration. Self-registration, where children take a name card and put it on a display at the beginning of the session, is more beneficial for all children.
- Providing reassurance when she was engaged with 'risky' activities like climbing and jumping; some quiet children have a particular worry about these and so benefit from adult support.
- The key person sharing her concerns with Magda's parents, but also explaining what steps staff planned to take to help her.
- Helping Magda to make choices by allowing her and her mother to come into the setting 10 minutes before the other children, so they could talk about what activities were available and talk with staff about what Magda might like to do during the session.
- Visiting Magda at home, to find out about her special interests. The family have a cat, and Magda enjoyed bringing in a photo of her pet, to show the adults and children.

If children are not making progress, or you suspect that a child has selective mutism, ask his or her parents' permission to seek advice from specialists in this field. Only speech and language therapists, psychologists or doctors with experience of selective mutism can make a diagnosis of this condition. Finally, like all children, quiet children benefit most from being helped to join in happily with activities, without being put under pressure to speak. This is often enough to set them on the right road to becoming confident talkers while away from home.

### about the author



Michael Jones provides practical training on language development in early years. His book, *Supporting Quiet Children* is co-authored by Maggie Johnson and available

from Lawrence Educational. For more information, visit [talk4meaning.co.uk](http://talk4meaning.co.uk)