

Introduction

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder that allows a child to be talkative at home but are unable to speak in public settings, including schools. Parents begin to notice signs of the disorder when the child is three or four years old (Child Mind Institute, 2025). Similarly, Mcholm, Cunningham and Vanier (2005a), also describe mutism as being a phobia. This phobia could be having a fear of anticipation of a particular situation or thing. An example that is used is the child having a fear of being seen or heard in certain situations.

Impact

Over a child's life, mutism can impact their daily lives by causing severe anxiety, such as separation anxiety, regular tantrums and crying, moodiness, sleep problems and shyness from an early age. Some children with mutism also have a sensory processing disorder which causes them to have problems processing information. This could cause them to be sensitive to sounds, lights, touch, taste and smells (Shipon-Blum, 2024).



(Image : Selective Mutism-Literacy-Sel, 2021)

MUTISM

Identifying and Diagnosing

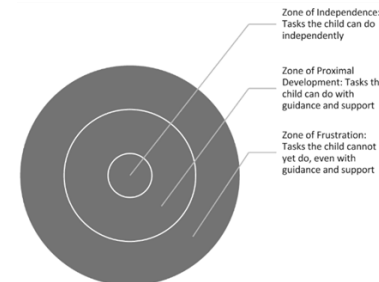
Some children can be shy or nervous about starting a new setting, however, if a child is not speaking within eight weeks, staff may want to begin the assessment process for mutism. Referrals can be made to either a Family Mental Health Service Department or Speech and Language Therapy (Aberdeenshire Council, 2013).

Once a referral has been completed and accepted, the child will be seen by a community clinic therapist who will complete a diagnostic assessment of the child in either a clinic, over a video call or in the child's setting. This will then create a case study on the child (Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, 2015).

Strategies

A way to support mutism in children would be to reduce the pressure of the child speaking. For staff within a childcare setting, they are able to help reduce anxiety and pressure of the child talking by allowing the child to pre-record what they would like to say at home, which can then be brought in and played during activities (Reitman, Reitman and Xu, 2024, p.113).

A support strategy for this additional learning need would be to create a safe and supportive environment for the child to be in. The environment that a practitioner creates should be anxiety-free by providing the child the opportunity to speak on their own terms rather than demanding them, reassuring the child that they will not be singled out within the environment, ensuring the child can access all the facilities in the setting and including the child in activities so that they do not become isolated (Devon County Council, 2022).



(Image : Doll, 2021b)

Impact of Barriers

Barriers to the additional learning need can include the child being on the autistic spectrum and the child having speech and language difficulties.

Bercovici (2023) discusses that autistic children can sometimes find themselves in situations where they are unable to communicate, similar to those with mutism. Children with autism can show signs by having characteristics of social interaction and communication difficulties. This can include having limited, delayed or no speech at all, not wanting to make eye contact with their peers and not engaging in a two-way conversations (National Autistic Society, 2024).

The Independent Speech and Language Therapy Services (2025) supports the National Autistic Society by discussing how an autistic child may have difficulty socializing with others in certain environments which could then further impact their mutism.

Furthermore, if a child with autism already feels overwhelmed by being in an unfamiliar setting or large group, it can increase the anxiety involved with mutism.

A further barrier to the additional learning need is that the child may have an underlying speech and language difficulty. Children with speech and language difficulties may have problems with speaking their language. This could be linked with having difficulty saying words or sentences and may find themselves struggling to express themselves or tell others how they feel. Children may also have difficulties with realizing their sense of self and forming relationships with others (BBC, 2014). Issues like the ones previously spoken about could be part of the reason why the child has a diagnosis for mutism.

Strategies Continued

SMIRA (n.d.) adds further support strategies by saying that it's an adult's responsibility to ensure the child feels valued and secure in their surroundings. By trying to reduce the embarrassment or anger about the child, it will help them feel settled and more confident.