



Talk4Meaning

Supporting children's communication and learning

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Selective Mutism: An adult reflects on her childhood and gives insights and suggestions to help quiet, shy and anxious children.

I was very pleased to hear about your work in tackling selective mutism. I had never heard of this condition until a couple of years ago and it seemed like everything about my childhood finally made sense. I suffered so much as a child with excessive shyness and anxiety about talking, and was unable to talk in certain situations. This made for a very unhappy childhood and a lot of struggles in adulthood. I was never diagnosed with SM but I know I had an anxiety disorder that was something more than shyness. When I was growing up selective mutism wasn't heard of, so I could only describe myself as an extremely shy child. When I used to look back on my childhood, before I heard of SM, I knew that what I experienced was something very much more than shyness.

I am now 53 and I know SM held me back in my life - and still holds me back to a certain degree.

Looking back on childhood

I have an older brother who did not grow up with the anxieties that I had, and I was relentlessly teased by him as I was growing up. My mother told me that as a baby he was very different from me: he slept well and was fairly content and he did not seem to require the attention that I needed or be so overly attached. My mother also told me that if I had to be disciplined she just needed to tell me off.

Maybe girls can be more emotional than boys and less sure of themselves and more eager to please.

My father was a reserved person and my mother seemed outwardly outgoing but was actually very shy. They did not have the difficulties that I had when they were growing up, but my mother did sympathise with my shyness. Her own father was a very quiet man, while her mother was very outgoing and confident. She told me that I would shake from head to foot at the thought of going to school and would often burst into tears for no reason. I was eight years old and a very unhappy child.

I was very sensitive: things that came naturally to other children were quite traumatic to me. I would constantly 'over think' situations and be extremely cautious. I describe my SM as 'closing down' and I think it is a defence mechanism - which was a device to protect myself from being overwhelmed. Teachers and adults would see me as quiet and calm when in actual fact I was terrified most of the time!

In school I was often overlooked. I was well behaved, got on with my work and didn't cause any disruption, so I didn't get very much attention from teachers. A little praise would have gone a long way for me when I was at school. I remember feeling quite grown up at an early age because I was so cautious and worried about the consequences of my actions.

I know that I was afraid of authority, so would be more at ease in classes where the teachers had created a relaxed atmosphere. I was very worried by strict teachers. I was (and still am) drawn to humour, so if lessons were fun - but not too rowdy - it would ease some anxiety. As a child I had greater difficulty talking to men rather than women. I suppose I associated men with my brother who would tease me, and my father who was an authoritarian figure. When I did try to talk I spoke very quietly and often people didn't hear me. I found it impossible to raise my voice even though I was frequently told to speak up.

I wasn't completely mute: I did not experience tightness in my throat, but I did have a fear of speaking. I would look down and mumble my words. I did not smile easily and lived in fear of being put on the spot and made to talk. I know I must have held my body stiffly, as I remember asking my father if I was meant to swing my arms when I walked. This gives an idea of the level of my self-consciousness when outside my home, yet when I was at home I felt safe and relaxed. I also felt desperately tired and drained and suffered from bad headaches. This was because my anxiety levels were so high most of the time.

How can adults help?

It is helpful for adults to ask the question, "Where does children's anxiety come from?" There is certainly a fear of being in groups, but also the fear of having to talk in that group is pretty high. I suppose it is linked in with self-consciousness and lack of confidence. I think the greatest lesson teachers can pass on to children is to help them to be self-confident and to be able to communicate well. I would have liked to have learnt that making mistakes is fine and a part of learning and be encouraged to experiment and take risks in a safe environment.

Children with SM are often very creative, and their creativity needs to be nurtured in as many ways as possible.

I have thought of a few ways in which these children could feel more at ease with adults: in school and when meeting them away from school.

- Approach them in an informal, friendly manner.
- Smile and use humour.
- Talk about their family/home/family pet/favourite TV programme. Talk a little about your own family too. Do not talk about school, as they will immediately be drawn into the anxiousness they feel when they are they are actually at school.
- Avoid asking too many questions.
- Speak calmly and slowly - as if you have all the time in the world for them - allow for some pauses in the hope that the child may contribute (if only a nod) - but not so long that you are putting them on the spot to join in.
- Listen - if they do attempt to talk - it will be very quietly
- If the child appears to close down, do not give up. If you give up talking to them at that point they will feel that they have failed. Continue talking in a positive manner.
- Try to end with praise or a compliment - this will be a reward which they will hopefully remember when you talk to them again.
- Large classes inhibit a lot of children so it may be good to break the children up into smaller groups to work together. The teacher can then observe how the children interact with each other. Join these groups to talk together as a class, and hopefully draw out the quieter children.

Although at times you may not feel you are getting through, quiet children do listen, take in what is said, and take to heart every word said to them.

More now than ever, people are interested in children's behaviour and how to channel their energies into things that will give them a brighter future and make them more responsible people. I would like to see children introduced to meditation to quieten their minds and their stress levels. I am also interested in Buddhist psychology and meditating on compassion: starting with compassion for oneself. That would be a good thing for children to learn. Also exercise every day to release stress and get them used to this habit to take them through life.

I know that the a longer a child suffers with anxiety, the greater the damage to their development, so giving them lots of support is well worth it.

Reflections on extreme shyness and anxiety

I think when a child with SM has a bad experience they associate it with the place they were in at the time. Their sense of failure means their confidence is easily shaken and so perpetuates the fear of speaking. Starting something new often brings a feeling of excitement and hope - but if they don't have the support and understanding they can flounder and find that it yet another place where they feel uncomfortable and afraid.

Some confident adults find it hard to empathise with the *fear* that these children experience. They regard it as shyness and feel that they should just toughen up.

In my teenage years I was often told to join groups to meet new people. Often the initial meeting was not so bad, once people had formed an opinion of me as being quiet. In later years I have got over this by actually forming groups of my own (a social group and a writing group). In some way - in organising - I had a right to be there I belonged.

I don't think people should think of SM children as being 'timid'. They are in fact very brave and really want to make their own mark in life.

I can understand that sometimes people who are anxious about talking can be seen as 'rude'. I know I used to find it difficult to make eye contact or smile whilst anyone spoke to me - I do try to do both now - although sometimes I have to make a conscious effort to do so.

I have I friend that I used to go to school with - we were both very quiet at school - and we still see each other. But when we go out she still fails to make eye contact with people who speak to her and I can see that it appears quite rude. So I make an effort to be polite.

It's difficult because you learn how to behave whilst growing up and although the motive behind your silence (fear) has disappeared, the behaviour still continues as it is learnt and now comes naturally.

I know quiet people do get a lot of criticism: a lot of people see shyness as a weakness. But a lot of extroverts often over- compensate and hide their fears with their loud personalities.

Now I am older

I am certainly physically suffering from the years of anxiety. My doctor can't understand why I have high blood pressure: I'm not over weight, I don't smoke and there is no immediate family history of high blood pressure. But I can understand that because my body has got used to behaving in an anxious state, it still continues to do so. I wish I could have developed an interest in sport when I was younger to get rid of the adrenaline.

Mostly I avoid having to do any talking in front of groups: although if I am feeling brave I do occasionally test myself, and would love to be able to talk in front of an audience. I find it difficult to talk in groups. The more talkative people tend to take over and by the time I think of something to say they have started talking about something else. Also my voice is not loud and I may try to say something but am not heard.

I suppose the answer is to dive in and talk without 'over thinking' the process. I enjoy humour and this is one thing I find that comes naturally. I can sometimes make a humorous comment without thinking it through - I just end up saying it!

I'm sorry to say that no one apart from my parents really offered any help. This is why I would like to see more help offered to children, teenagers and young adults. I did manage to make a few good friends and I think my own sensitive nature made me a good friend that is quick to empathise with other people's feelings. I also regard myself as a very creative person. I think this is true of many children with SM and this needs to be nurtured in them.

I would often get criticised for my quietness, but a rather nice thing was said about me by a work colleague: "L doesn't say much, but when she does it's usually worth waiting for". I was - am still am - a naturally quiet person, but the difference between now and then is that the intense anxiety and fear does not dominate my life. I describe my SM as 'closing down'. I think of it as a defence mechanism: a device to protect myself from being overwhelmed. Teachers and adults would see me as quiet and calm when in actual fact I was terrified most of the time!

Some children have little experience of meeting people outside of the family. Their family members are those they feel that they have always known and trusted. They did not have to be introduced to them: unlike teachers and other adults and children. A lot of children are shy when they meet new people but they learn to trust and open up. Children with SM have difficulty doing this, though their fear is greater than the actual danger.

As a joke I used to describe myself as having 'an over developed sense of self-preservation', but maybe that's what SM is. I now regard meeting new people and challenges as exciting, but sometimes I feel that I let myself down by lapsing into silence and fear when I am actually in the situation. But I don't beat myself up as much as I did when I was a child: I think this is because I can also think of times when I have been confident and successful. But children who fail to speak day in and day out must feel that they have failed most days of their young lives. This is bound to sap their confidence.

I now feel that I want to take more risks and wonder how my life would have turned out if I had been treated for SM at an early age.

I think it is very important work that you are doing by helping these children, and you are most certainly changing their lives.

As discussed with Michael Jones