How do you distinguish between children who are shy or ‘just very quiet’ or those who may have selective mutism? Maggie Johnson and Michael Jones offer advice for practitioners.

Silent types

Shy children usually welcome adult support, while children with selective mutism are more wary of people with whom they feel comfortable. Typically, the child is able to speak at home, with familiar family members, but experiences extreme anxiety about speaking outside their home. This anxiety is so strong that the child often describes experiencing an actual blockage in their throat, possibly caused by muscular tension. Selective mutism may begin as extreme shyness in a child’s pre-school years and develop into selective mutism by the time the child starts school. The condition was originally known as ‘elective’ mutism, as it was thought that the children were choosing to be silent in public. It is now generally accepted that the children do want to speak, but their anxiety prevents them from speaking in certain situations, and most typically in early years settings or school.

We can make a clear distinction between children who are shy and those with selective mutism by observing their reactions to adults. Shy children are generally unsure of themselves and usually welcome help with joining in, whereas children with selective mutism have a specific dread of speaking. They may suddenly shut down, back off or become almost frozen or rooted to the spot and unable to respond. They become wary of what they perceive to be a threat to make them talk. They may also be too ‘frozen’ to communicate non-verbally, including making eye contact, smiling, nodding or pointing.

Support available

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual (Speechmark Publishing) outlines many techniques for helping children to develop as confident speakers. Key to making progress is to help children to feel secure enough to start speaking. If they do want to speak, but are hesitant, they need to be reassured that they do want to be heard. The most important thing that we can do for all ‘quiet’ children, regardless of the underlying cause, is to believe that they all want to talk, and that they are able to use language. We are able to remain positive and have a consistent approach to helping them.

Maggie Johnson is a speech and language therapist specialising in supporting children with selective mutism. Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer.

The following suggestions can be used as part of a whole-setting approach to supporting children who are quiet, shy or have a diagnosis of selective mutism:

- Encourage the child to join in non-verbal means – for example, by pointing, nodding or shaking their heads, or using a puppet.
- Encourage participation through natural conversation and by sharing books where you comment, laugh and pause rather than ask direct questions.
- Within the setting, take steps to alleviate any anxiety that may be affecting the child. For example, change from a registration system where children have to call their name to one where children ‘self-register’ with their parents, and arrange for a staff member to ‘meet and greet’ children and their parents as they arrive.
- Encourage the child to take part in activities in pairs. Wary children can be reassured by another familiar child prepared to go first in trying something new.
- Singing in a group can help children to ‘find their voice’ without anyone noticing or drawing attention to them.
- Alert children to anything new that is going to happen, such as a visitor, a trip or a new activity. Allowing children to talk about events in advance will remove their uncertainty and reduce their anxiety.
- Praise children for making small steps towards joining in and talking - for example, by saying quietly, ‘You made a real effort talking – for example, by saying...

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