What can it mean if your child does not speak ...

Shyness or selective mutism?
The following characteristics may apply to people with selective mutism:

- The child does not speak in certain situations. He/she does speak at home or to people he/she is familiar with.
- The child is very expressive at home and sometimes speaks a great deal (as if to make up for periods of silence).
- The child finds it difficult to initiate interactions (e.g. saying hello, goodbye, thank you and asking questions).
- At school the child compensates for his/her refusal to speak with a good performance in his/her written work.
- In comparison with children of the same age the child seems to observe and perceive the world around him/her more carefully (also with regard to moods and emotions), has, on the other hand difficulties expressing his/her own feelings.

During periods of silence you may see:

- “blank” facial expression
- stiff lips (no smiles)
- fixed stare
- lack of eye contact
- “frozen”/“rigid” body posture/facial expression/body language
- stiff body, arms pressed close to their sides, clenched hands
- delayed reactions
What is selective mutism?

Selective mutism describes the inability to speak in specific social situations (e.g. kindergarten/school) or to certain people (e.g. people who are not part of the immediate family).

There is not one specific cause for not speaking in certain conditions. In most cases, the reasons lie in a number of different conditions.

The information from the kindergarten teacher dashes her hopes. A move to a different childcare centre five weeks previously had not solved the problem. Ms. M can still hear the concerned words of Nele’s new kindergarten teacher.

According to her, all in all Nele is very quiet. She never says a word when arriving or leaving and also reacts with silence to any direct requests. In fact, she never says a word to anyone. Nele rarely makes eye contact and often seems stony-faced. The kindergarten teacher clearly had no idea what to do, just like Ms. M herself. This is because at home Nele talks non-stop and behaves completely normally in the presence of her best friend. There is not a trace of shyness. So the reason must lie somewhere else. But where and what can be done?

Does this story seem familiar to you?

We would like to provide you with some information about a relatively unknown disorder that might be able to help you.

The behaviour of children who refuse to speak in certain situations is often misinterpreted by their environment as stubborn, obstinate or simply extremely shy. As a rule, kindergarten or school teachers inform the parents about the persistent silence. However, only too often no suitable intervention is initiated because it is hoped the child will “grow out of” the silence.
In some cases, autism is prematurely and mistakenly assumed. A correct diagnosis and appropriate therapeutic steps are, however, extremely important for such a child.

Experience has shown that without any intervention the disorder can become more clearly apparent, lasts for years and that ultimately the disturbed patterns of communication will continue into adulthood.

**What can you do as parents?**

If the silence continues for more than four weeks, have your child examined by a speech therapist. For this you will need a prescription (Heilmittelverordnung) for speech therapy. This can be issued by your paediatrician or your ear, nose and throat doctor. Selective mutism belongs to the category of delays in speech development. This has to be stated in the prescription.

In Germany, the therapy is paid for by your health insurance company and carried out by speech therapists, specialists for speech defects or specialists for breathing techniques and voice coaches.

Make sure you choose a therapist who is familiar with the disorder. Before beginning the therapy, an in-depth conversation between you and the therapist should be a priority. A close cooperation between parents, teachers and, if necessary, psychotherapists is advisable.
What should you bear in mind?

- Do not take your child’s silence personally!

- Recognise the refusal to speak as an active form of behaviour which - at some point - served a useful purpose for the child/youngster.

- The child cannot deliberately stop being silent as this has developed and been maintained over a number of years.

- Do not ask or in any way force your child to speak. The children experience only too frequently the feeling of “failure”, of not being able to answer. Any request that they speak increases the pressure on the children and their fear of the next occasion when they have to speak.

- If you emphasise your child’s first remark then only in an extremely sensitive way.

- Do not make the child the focus of attention.

- Do not exclude the child.

- Ultimately, the child him/herself will decide whether and when he/she will give up the refusal to speak. It is our responsibility to accompany the child, to positively reinforce him/her, to learn to be patient and to understand.
Useful questions:

- How, when and with whom does your child communicate?
- How do I react / how do others react to the refusal to speak?
- What does your child achieve with his/her silence?
- Does your child make eye contact? (If so, when and with whom?)
- Which other non-verbal means (facial expression/body language) does your child use?
- Does your child react appropriately to instructions?
- How can your child reach his/her objectives?
- Are there exceptions? (Has your child at any time spoken “by mistake”? When, where, with whom?)
- What is your child particularly good at?

StillLeben e.V. Hannover

StillLeben e.V.
c/o Julia C. Reimelt

Zum Hainholz 51
D-37181 Hardegse
info@selektiver-mutismus.de

You can find the number of our telephone helpline on our website.

Translation: Lynda Elger

www.selektiver-mutismus.de