

SELECTIVE MUTISM

INCLUSIVENESS

“ I have packed myself into silence so deeply and for so long that I can never unpack myself using words. When I speak, I only pack myself a little differently.”

- Herta Müller, *The Hunger Angel*

The Aim of Scouting is to promote the development of individuals, enabling them to grow and take their place in society as active citizens. As we move forward with the Canadian Path we are much more aware of each individual's personal progression, inclusive of their varying abilities. This inclusiveness within Scouting uniquely positions us to play an important role in modifying community attitudes and behaviour towards individuals with identified needs; it starts with Scouts.

Please use this guide for a better understanding of youth with Selective Mutism; how as Scouters, we can make a difference through simple interventions, program modifications and knowing where to get help when needed.

DESCRIPTION

Selective Mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder in which a person who is normally capable of speech does not speak in specific situations or to specific people. Selective Mutism usually co-exists with shyness or social anxiety. Children with Selective Mutism stay silent even when the consequences of their silence include shame, social ostracism or even punishment.

CHARACTERISTICS/BEHAVIOURS

Youth diagnosed with SM may exhibit some of the following characteristics or behaviours:

- Youth with SM understand language and are able to talk normally in settings where they are comfortable, secure and relaxed
- Over 90 % of youth with SM also have Social Phobia or Social Anxiety
- Youth will not speak in social settings; will usually speak in the home setting where he/she feels safe and secure but remain mute in other settings
- The youth's social/educational functioning is very inhibited
- Lack of eye contact
- Craves routine and dislikes changes
- Sensitivity to noises and crowds
- Above-average intelligence, perception, or inquisitiveness
- Often creative and shows a love for art or music
- Empathetic and sensitive to others' thoughts and feelings
- A strong sense of right and wrong
- In social settings they freeze up and maintain a rigidity in posture and do not smile

IN A SCOUTING SITUATION

- Consult fully with the parents and the youth to obtain helpful guidelines for engaging the youth and insuring for their best possible outcome with their Scouting experience
- With the assistance of the parents, learn the techniques that reduce the anxiety for the youth
- Acknowledge the youth's fear of speaking with a display of empathy
- Inquire as to the youth's desire to be able to speak
- Assist the youth to achieve the goal to speak by sharing with him/her that you will move slow, not force him/her; that you will go at their pace
- Be warm, encouraging and empathetic



- Be consistent and provide a firm, caring hand
- Provide plenty of praise for any sound or attempt at communication the youth might make
- Allow other means of communication like text messages, symbols, gestures, cards, email
- For verbal reports, the youth may tape themselves at home and then bring the tape to the meeting
- If youth use gestures such as nodding their head or pointing, tell them that they are doing a good job, this can help to encourage them to speak
- Accommodate the youth with SM by pairing with a preferred peer
- Involve the youth with his/her peers in various activities
- Monitor the group, and the youth with SM, for signs of ostracizing, stigma, and/or bullying

PROGRAM MODIFICATION SUGGESTIONS

- None

FURTHER ASSISTANCE

This Info Sheet is a resource guide only and is not intended to be therapeutic, diagnostic, medical, or legal advice. Our best source of assistance for youth with identified needs is the youth's parents or caregivers; the information provided is designed to support the relationship that exists between a youth and his/her parents or healthcare providers and the Scouters involved with the youth.

SOURCES

www.slideshare.net/GauravSingh199/presentation-on-selective-mutism, www.youthmind.org/en/posts/real-stories/2011-6-27-tips-selective-mutism, www.selectivemutismfoundation.org/sound.html, and material adapted and used by permission of The Scout Association (UK), Scouts Australia, and Scouting Ireland

