



## **Testing Expressive Language in Children with Selective Mutism**

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Children with selective mutism (SM) speak at home with immediate family members but do not readily speak in situations where they feel uncomfortable, more typically at school. Interestingly, SM most frequently emerges during the early school experience and affects approximately 1 in 140 children. Analyses of differences in the home and school environments reveal that the type of language used at home is more context-bound than the language required at school. According to recent research by Marvin & Cline (2010) comparing the spoken language of adults at school and home, teachers were found to talk more about people, places, things, and events not in the present (decontextualized topics) than what parents talk about with children at home. Also, during the early school years, talk among peers often includes more fantasy than the context-bound language of home. Narration, which includes the ability to talk about events and tell stories, (e.g. fantasy), is a form of decontextualized language and is considered a more challenging task than conversation. To be effective, the child must be guided by internal organizational rules with an ability to verbally convey events. For some children, difficulty in this type of language expression may make speaking an anxiety-provoking task and thus especially challenging for a child with SM who is already experiencing heightened anxiety.

While some children with SM may have an accompanying expressive language disorder, it has been difficult to assess. Since children with SM more readily speak to their parents than to others, our team of researchers at the Selective Mutism Research Institute solicited the help of parents in testing using the standardized and norm-referenced Test of Narrative Language (TNL). After a training session, parents asked their children questions from the testing protocol while alone in a room and being videotaped. Speech-language pathologists and psychologists then analyzed and scored the results for more than 60 children. They found that more than half of 61 children had significant difficulty formulating language to tell a story to their parents (when no one else was around). The children did not appear anxious during this time and many

sang, walked around the room, and spoke freely using a normal voice. However, they had difficulty retelling a story and making up stories using picture cues.

Using a parent-supported format, more complete language results have been made possible. While most children with SM performed within normal limits on vocabulary measures, the researchers discovered a substantial number of children with expressive language formulation problems requiring treatment. While behavioral types of treatment may help children with SM to begin to talk in more challenging settings, what they say has not been systematically addressed. It may be that over time, their lack of experiences talking to others using more decontextualized language actually leads to an expressive language delay.

It is speculated that lack of exposure and experience with decontextualized language (including narrative language) can result in delayed language formulation. Children with SM find it difficult to verbally communicate in situations requiring narration and conversation, most often at school. As language tasks become more challenging in situations outside the home, anxiety may increase because the linguistic load becomes more demanding. Over time, a child's lack of effective expressive language output (speaking) may lead to greater impairment with verbal expression and greater resistance to change.

The message is that children who cannot be properly tested on expressive language tasks cannot be assumed to have normal language ability just because they talk at home and score within the normal range on receptive, comprehension tasks as well as on word production tasks. Just because a child can name objects, say one to two words or a sentence in response to a question, that does not mean that their narrative language skills are functional. Both comprehension and narrative language are important areas to assess so that an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) may be developed and implemented by a professional who knows not only about SM but also about language development and disorders.

Marvin, C.A., & Cline, K.D. (2010). Bus talk: A preliminary analysis of children's decontextualized talk. *Communication Disorder Quarterly*, 3(3), 170-181.

For information on authors and testing of speech/language skills in children with Selective Mutism go to: [www.selectivemutismcenter.org](http://www.selectivemutismcenter.org)

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