

When a child stops speaking, researcher helps find their voice

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Credit: Florida International University

Eleven-year-old Aylani Suazo has not spoken to anyone in school since age 7.

Her mother, Aysel, knew there was a problem halfway through the school year when Aylani was in first grade. What seemed like just shyness was affecting her daughter's progress in school. Aylani went completely silent.

It was only about a year ago that Aysel realized her daughter suffers from selective mutism—an anxiety disorder that causes her to not utter a word in certain public places, like school, although she is otherwise talkative at home.

More prevalent in girls than boys, selective mutism is two to three times more likely to affect bilingual children. The disorder can hinder academic achievement and socialization. It can cause a [child](#) to become isolated and withdrawn leading to missed birthday parties and less time in the playground.

Most elementary schools have at least one child with selective mutism. The condition usually begins by age 5, but it is often mistaken for shyness and goes undiagnosed until it begins to interfere with a child's progress in school.

"There are a number of factors that put a child at risk for selective mutism including anxiety in the family history, reinforcing avoidant behavior or allowing the child to escape speaking opportunities and modeling of anxious behavior," said FIU Center for Children and Families psychologist Jami Furr. "It is much less common for a trauma to be the trigger of selective mutism."



Psychologist Jami Furr encourages Aylani Suazo to use her brave voice during “Wacky Wednesday” activities at the FIU Center for Children and Families’ Brave Bunch Camp. Credit: Florida International University

Furr's training and research focuses on anxiety disorders. She decided to specialize in selective mutism after identifying a real need for effective treatment and a lack of available services.

For a year, Aylani received therapy to treat her selective mutism in her home state of North Carolina with no success. This past summer, Aylani and her family traveled to South Florida to take part in FIU's Brave Bunch Program for Selective Mutism.

"When I realized Aylani's anxiety was affecting her in and out of school, I began looking for local help but could not find people that specialized in selective mutism," Aysel said. "I found information on Brave Bunch online and decided to take the chance."

One of only seven programs in the country and the only one in the

Southeastern United States, Brave Bunch is a week-long program designed with a camp format for children ages 4 through 10. Directed by Furr, the program teaches coping skills, incorporates activities that encourage verbalization, social interaction and exposure to unfamiliar peers and adults to help children like Aylani find their "brave voice." The camp also incorporates daily two-hour parent training sessions and bi-monthly booster sessions for families after camp is over.

"With six-hour days, they have time to process, adjust and practice multiple situations with repeated exposure," Furr told the New York Times. "The idea is to translate gains to a real school setting, where they have the most limited speech."

For Aylani, the week she spent at FIU's Brave Bunch camp proved to be transformative. She now orders in restaurants and responds when spoken to. As she gets ready to start the 5th grade, Aylani is already communicating with her teachers and peers.

"Brave Bunch has given us both my daughter and I strength and the tools we need to move forward," Aysel said. "I would definitely recommend this program. So far it has changed our lives."

More information: For information about services related to selective mutism and other anxiety disorders, contact FIU's Center for Children and Families at 305-348-0477 or visit ccf.fiu.edu

Provided by Florida International University

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