

When a Young Person Shuts Down

What you may see, what may be happening, and what to try next

Shutdown is communication - even when there are no words.

A young person who goes silent, puts their head down, says "I don't know," avoids eye contact, freezes, leaves, or stops responding may be overwhelmed, protecting themselves, processing slowly, disengaged, angry, exhausted, or something else entirely. Do not diagnose the behavior from the outside.

YOU MAY SEE

- silence or one-word answers
- head down / eyes away
- "I don't know" repeated
- freezing or going still
- walking away / hiding
- refusal to engage

POSSIBLE MEANINGS

- overload or fear
- shame or perceived threat
- slow processing
- anger or self-protection
- fatigue / sensory overload
- lack of trust or readiness

TRY FIRST

- reduce language
- lower your physical presence
- offer time without disappearing
- give one safe choice
- name what is observable
- protect dignity and privacy

AVOID

- rapid-fire questions
- "Use your words"
- public pressure
- assuming defiance
- touching without consent
- forcing eye contact

LANGUAGE THAT LOWERS PRESSURE

- "You do not have to answer right away."
- "I can give you a minute and check back."
- "Would it help if I asked one question at a time?"
- "I am not going to make you talk in front of everyone."

A simple response sequence

Use curiosity before certainty. Adjust based on safety, age, culture, disability, context, and what you know about the young person.

A BETTER QUESTION THAN “WHY WON’T THEY TALK?”

What would make engagement feel safer or more possible right now?

Sometimes the answer is time. Sometimes privacy. Sometimes fewer words. Sometimes a different adult. Sometimes a snack, movement, a quieter space, a clearer expectation, or simply not having to perform distress for an audience.

1

NOTICE

Describe what you can actually observe.

“You got really quiet when we started talking about what happened.”

2

REDUCE

Lower verbal, sensory, social, and performance demands.

Move away from the audience. Ask less. Slow down. Give processing time.

3

OFFER

Give one or two realistic ways to engage.

“You can tell me, write it, point, or we can come back to it in five minutes.”

4

STAY PREDICTABLE

Do what you said you would do.

If you say you will return in five minutes, return. Trust grows through predictable follow-through.

5

RECONNECT

When capacity returns, revisit what happened without shame.

Support reflection, repair, accountability, problem-solving, and planning for next time.

REMEMBER

A shutdown response does not automatically mean trauma, defiance, manipulation, disrespect, or refusal. Your job is to respond to what you observe, maintain appropriate expectations, and create the conditions for safe re-engagement.

If there is an immediate safety concern, follow your organization’s crisis or emergency procedures.