

Episode 10 – The Power of a Playdate to Help a Child with Selective Mutism

Hello and welcome to the Selective Mutism HELP, Home Educational Learning Program, Podcast, my name is Kelly, and I will be your host. This podcast aims to give you the help you need to support the person in your life affected by selective mutism. In this episode I'll be talking about how a playdate can help your child start speaking to friends which can lead them to start speaking in school. I'll share strategies we used for our daughter to transfer speech from home to school by simply having playdates. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 10 of the Selective Mutism HELP Home Educational Learning Program podcast. My name is Kelly, and I am a parent of a child with Selective Mutism. Being that I am a parent and not a medical professional, this podcast is for informational purposes only. Before we knew anything about Selective Mutism, my idea of a playdate was basically an excuse for me to hang out with another mom while our kids were off doing kid things. But, once we found out our daughter had Selective Mutism, that image of the perfect playdate went out the window. Before I get into how we used a playdate to help our daughter talk to her friends, I want to tell you about a playdate we had before our daughter was diagnosed. She was 3 and in her first year of preschool. Towards the middle of the school year, I started to get to know some of the parents of the students that were in our daughter's class. One of them mentioned that we should get the kids together for a playdate. I figured I should probably start to get to know the parents in our area a little better and give our daughter an opportunity to play with some friends outside of school. So, I organized a playdate to have a couple classmates come over with their parents to play and hangout outside. Our daughter was really excited about them coming over. She talked about it just about every day and kept asking when they were going to come. The day finally arrived and the image of how I thought the playdate was going to go was completely wrong. Our daughter was ignoring her friends, wasn't playing with them, wasn't talking to them, and disappeared into the house numerous times. As vain as this sounds, I was completely embarrassed by how our daughter was acting. I kept thinking how the other moms probably thought I was a pushover for allowing our daughter to act that way or that our daughter wasn't taught manners or how to be a nice friend. I did my best to keep my cool and was so happy when the playdate finally ended.

That first playdate should have been a red flag to me that something was going on, but again, we didn't know about SM. Once we got the diagnosis and understood that our daughter was anxious when her friends were over, it made complete sense as to why she acted that way during her first playdate. After the diagnosis, I was ready to try again with a playdate. I sent an email to her teacher to forward to the other parents. It basically told them that our daughter had Selective Mutism and we are wanting to have playdates at our house to get our daughter comfortable communicating around her classmates. I didn't know any of the other parents and it was definitely outside of my comfort zone to put myself and my child out there like that. But, it ended up being the best thing for her! We had four parents reach out to us who wanted to help our daughter. At first, we had the classmate and parents come over. Our daughter was much better this time around and actually played with the kids that came. However, she didn't talk to her friends or to me while they were there. After a few visits with some of the kids, I asked their parents if they would feel comfortable dropping off their child with us for an hour or so. I realized that she was probably having a hard time talking because the parents were there. Her anxiety was too high with having them there and it was preventing her from being vocal, even towards me. I asked our daughter which friends she would want to talk to and started from there. Again, it was out of my comfort zone to ask a parent to drop off their young child with me, but they were kind enough to agree. Prior to the first playdate where it was just

going to be the child, my daughter and I would role play at bedtime. I would play her friend and she would play herself. I would ask her questions like “what is your favorite animal? What is your favorite color? What’s our favorite movie”, etc. Then she would ask me those questions. She would tell ‘her friend’ played by me the answers and we would continue our conversation as two little 4 ½ year old would. She did great with this. I must have had some pretty good acting skills, because she really was talking to me as if I was her friend. The big day came where her friend was dropped off at our house. It was a beautiful day, so we played outside. At one point the girls were on a bench swing and I was standing behind them. I must have said something along the lines of “I wonder what your friend’s favorite color is, you should ask her.” And my daughter did! Here is the recording of her asking her friend her favorite color. Then, her friend asked our daughter what her favorite animal was, and she was able to answer it! Here is the recording of her answering that question. You may even hear a little stutter in there when our daughter does answer. Thank goodness I was standing behind them, because I could not stop the tears from streaming down my face. What an amazing moment! At that moment I knew our daughter would overcome her SM. I knew that she was a warrior and she would not let SM defeat her anymore. From that point on, our daughter played and talked to her friend like any other kid. They played Candy Land and our daughter was able to talk while playing. When her friend left, I heard her say to her mom with the biggest smile on her face “Mom, she talked to me today.” Not only was it a big day for our daughter, but it was a big day for her friend as well.

We had another play date with a different friend about a week later. Same thing, we had the mom drop her daughter off at our house. This time we started inside playing the game Candy Land which was the game she played while talking to her other friend. We started the game by our daughter holding up fingers for the number of squares on her card – most of the cards had either one or two colored squares on them. This was a technique we learned from our SM therapist. As our daughter became comfortable doing this, I began asking her the color on her card by using a forced choice question – Did you get yellow or purple? And she was responding. Perfect. After she did that a few times I then would ask an open choice question “what color did you get?” and she was answering! Soon I was able to fade myself out and she continued talking with her friend. She even broke out her Frozen microphone and was belting out Let it Go! She now had two friends she could comfortably talk to at our house!

The next step was having her talk to her friends outside our home. We arranged a playdate at a local park. There was one day they had a magic show so we went to that, played at the park, and had lunch. The goal we had that day was to talk to me in front of her friend’s mom and not only was she able to do that, but she was able to answer questions that her friend’s mom asked. We continued to meet with other friends and their parents and we were consistently seeing her talking. One of her friend’s grandmas was an assistant at her preschool, so it was great to be able to have her talking around that adult. It was a busy summer with all the playdates, but with school starting it was an opportunity to see if her hard work was going to pay off. We talked to the teachers before the year started and let them know about the students she was able to speak to. We let them know that our daughter could talk to them, so if they needed an answer from our daughter, to have her tell her friend and the friend would be able to tell the teacher what our daughter said.

Throughout the year she was able to talk to more and more kids in her class. We encouraged her by creating a list of who she could talk to and who she wanted to talk to. Anytime she talked to a student on the “I want to talk to” list, she would get 2 brave tickets and be able to move that friend’s name to the I can talk to list. Brave tickets were a big thing for her, because

she could cash them in for ice cream or staying up late with me depending on the number of tickets she earned. Once she moved a friend's name to the I can talk to list and talked to them again, she would earn 1 brave ticket and get to put a star next to that friend's name. Every day after school we would sit together and she would tell me who she talked to and I would reward her with the appropriate number of brave tickets. It was so amazing for her to see the number of names accumulate on the I can talk to side and how many stars we were able to put alongside those names.

We still had a long way to go with helping her to start talking to relatives, medical professionals, new teachers, etc, but at least we were at a point where she was comfortable talking with kids in her class. If it wasn't for me getting out of my comfort zone and reaching out to other parents, our daughter may not have had the opportunities to practice being brave. I can also say, that the parents I met that summer have become some of my good friends. There is a special bond between us and I will forever be grateful for them to trust me with their child to allow my daughter's anxiety to lower enough for her to be able to communicate verbally with her friends.

If you are interested in getting a plan together to help your child take steps towards communicating with friends during a play date, I am now offering parent coaching. This will be an opportunity for you and I to work together to help your child take the small steps needed to start overcoming their SM. If you would like more information, please email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com and we can get started working as a team. Don't forget, you can find various resources about SM at www.smhelp.org and by liking Selective Mutism HELP on Facebook. Take care everyone!