

## Episode 11 – Selective Mutism and the Holiday Season

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 preparation, modifying the environment, and educating family and friends can increase the likelihood that someone with Selective Mutism will hopefully be able to enjoy the crazy holiday season. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 11 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. I feel like I can safely say that the majority of people really enjoy this time of year – there's family gatherings, presents, food, school parties, and so much more. But, for someone with Selective Mutism, this time of year can be one of the most difficult. There are so many expectations to meet such as saying hello to family members they haven't seen an awhile, saying thank you for presents that have received, being flexible with a different routine and schedule. This creates even more anxiety for someone that is already working through anxiety issues.

Let's start by talking about preparing your child for an upcoming family gathering. In the past, the SM child has probably been in a situation where they are in a room full of people they may not know, they are being asked a ton of questions, they may be at a relative's house instead of their own, and their parents are probably busy talking to other people. All of this can make a child with SM feel very isolated, anxious, and uneasy. Educating family members about Selective Mutism, prior to any family gathering is so important. Easier said than done, right? It can be really intimidating to re-teach someone how to interact with your child. They may have their own viewpoints on how you should parent your child or how a child should behave, but none of that matters when interacting with someone that has Selective Mutism. They need to understand that your child isn't deliberately avoiding questions being asked, they aren't choosing to throw a tantrum if they are feeling overwhelmed, they aren't being defiant because they won't smile for a picture. As a parent, you need to explain that Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder. Let them know that your child wants nothing more than to be able to talk with each and every family member. But, due to their anxiety, their brain is telling them that its far too dangerous to speak in front of others. Does this rationally make sense? No. But we can't dismiss the fact that when they are around extended family members, their brain is telling their body to do whatever it can to escape that environment. So, what can family members do to lower your child's anxiety level? They need to take all expectations for the child to speak away. I've said this before, how can we possibly get a child with SM to speak if we take the expectation to speak away. Seems counterintuitive. But, the reason we do this, is to allow the child's anxiety level to lower. If they realize that their great uncle isn't asking question and after question expecting them to answer, their anxiety will lower and this may be just what they needed to finally answer one of those questions. Instead of a relative rushing over and giving the child a big hug and asking how school is and what have they been up to and if they are excited to be on a break from school, lovingly say Hi, it's so nice to see you, I love those cute socks or shirt or hair bow, whatever they can say to compliment the child. That's it. For now. Next, the family member could show pictures of something the child may be into. "Hey, let me

show you pictures of my neighbors cute dog. He is the funniest little puppy I've ever seen." Something fun and entertaining that you know the child would be interested in seeing. Parents, when you are educating family members about SM, let them know what your child is currently into. Are they playing any sports, what are their hobbies, what is their favorite subject in school? That way, relatives will have an idea of what to bring up to the SM child to continue to decrease the amount of anxiety the child is feeling. Another option could be for a relative to bring a special activity for the SM child to complete. Who doesn't like making a turkey out of tracing your hand or making paper snowflakes by folding and cutting paper? Working on an activity together and commenting on how great the child's artwork is, again, will start decreasing their anxiety level. Using the P.R.I.D.E. skills – Praise, Reflect, Imitate, Describe, and Enthusiasm – can be a great way to interact with an SM child. I'll leave a link in the episode notes to learn more about this technique. As the child becomes more and more comfortable around the family members, a family member could try to include the SM child in a task. For example, they could pass out all the forks when it's time for pie or pass out napkins once everyone is seated or handing out gifts if they are able to read names. Giving them an opportunity to hand something to someone is a great first step at communicating. The family member receiving something from the SM child can say a simple "Thank you" and remember not to expect a "You're Welcome."

To all the parents out there listening, there are a lot of things you can do to prepare your child for an upcoming family gathering. First, make sure to share as many details about the gathering as possible so your child can start visualizing how things will go. Tell them where they are going, who will be there, a timeline of how the day will go, and approximately what time you'll be leaving. If you have a very young child with SM, they may not remember who all of their relatives are, so showing them pictures of everyone that will be there may help. Also, sharing silly stories about that person or how they are related may help as well. Try to find out ahead of time what food will be served and asking your child what they would like to eat. Again, they can start visualizing themselves eating those items so when they are actually in the moment, they will have a better chance of making choices and eating something. It can be very common for a child with SM to have difficulty eating in front of others. Along those same lines, when it is time for everyone to gather for a meal, talk with the host and see if they can set up a smaller table for just a few people to eat at. Then, you can ask your child who they would want to sit with while they eat at the smaller table. You could practice coming up with different common topics of conversation and role play through them.

Another thing parents can do prior to going to a family gathering is preparing a backpack or bag of some sort with the child's favorite items – favorite game, book, stuffed animal, coloring book, etc. It can be a way for them to have control of the situation and know that they will have something they enjoy at their fingertips. Plus, it could be an opportunity for a family member to comment on or join in on one of the activities they brought. As long as no questions are asked about the item right away – just simply commenting on the item. Parents could also ask their child ahead of time, who they would you want to play the game with. That way, parents could help facilitate the conversation of asking their relative or friend to play the game and facilitate communication throughout. Remember, communication is more than just talking. The child could nod their head, hold up fingers in response to a question – hold up one finger if you want to play Chutes and Ladders, two fingers if you want to play Yahtzee, and three fingers if you

want to do something else. They can also say mmhmm/uh-uh instead of yes no, then work up to saying yes/no, answering a forced choice question, then answering an open-ended question.

If you are going to another person's house for a gathering, ask the hosts if you could come before any of the other guests. This will allow the SM child warm-up time in a calmer, quieter setting. Again, if you have some of their favorite games and activities, you could start playing it and as the parent, do what you can to keep your child talking to you. The goal is to have them talking to someone they are comfortable with while people they are not comfortable talking to are within earshot. Please remember to remind family members to not make a big deal out of the fact that the SM child is talking. We don't want them to say something like "Wow, Jimmy, I've never heard you talk before. I didn't think you could!" That is a sure fire way to make an SM child not want to speak anymore. If the child is appearing comfortable with being there prior to other guests arriving, see if they could do a task as the guests arrive – grab their coats, take the food they brought into the kitchen, take any gifts they brought to the right spot. Again, taking something from someone is a form of communicating and a great first step in allowing the child to communicate without speaking.

In an absolute ideal world, it would be best for the parents of the SM child to host the family gathering at their house. That way, the SM child doesn't have to have the added anxious thoughts of how long will it take us to get there, what if I can't find the bathroom, where can I go to feel safe, what if there isn't anything fun for me to do? They will already be at their house, know what is all there, and it's a place where they, generally speaking, already feel comfortable talking. When you are inviting the guests, stagger their arrival times. Talk with your SM child before hand about which relatives they would want to talk to and have them arrive first. Have an activity that the SM child can be doing as the guests arrive and that they can join in on when they get there. I'm going to say it again, make sure the guest coming over does not ask any questions to the child, simply be near them, comment on what they are doing and do the same thing they are doing. If the child does speak, do not make a big deal about it. If they are not quite at a point of speaking to the guest, Parents, this is an opportunity for you to try to have your child speak to you in front of the guest. Start with them nodding their head, answering mmhmm/uh-uh, then yes/no, forced choice, up to answering open-ended questions from you. The guest could repeat what the child said and agree with the statement. For example, the parent could ask "Bonnie, do you think you're going to want apple pie or pumpkin pie after dinner?" If the child responds "Apple," the guest could say "ooh, apple, good choice, I think I'm going to have that too!" As more and more guests arrive, keep an eye on the SM child's body language – are they picking at their fingers, looking away, seem tense – these are all signs that anxiety may be creeping in. Try to intervene with a movement activity – rolling a ball to a cousin or playing catch depending on their skill level, playing Simon Says, Red light Green light, or Follow the Leader. Something fun and silly to hopefully push out the anxious feelings.

In the Fall 2021 Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Online Summit it was mentioned to practice and role play prior to encountering an anxiety provoking situation. Think about the most common questions relatives ask kids – what grade are you in? What is your teacher's name? How is school going? Are you in any sports? What are you going to be doing over school break? What has been your favorite tv show you've been watching? Practice asking them these questions so they can get comfortable answering them. Its training their brain to know what to say so they

don't have to come up with the answers on the spot. It can be really difficult to answer even the simplest question when you are in a fight/flight/freeze state of mind.

Another area to consider during the holidays is what the school has going on. There is a good chance your child is going to be required to do a holiday program or performance for family and friends to come watch. This is extremely anxiety provoking for an SM child. There are some things you can modify for the SM child to still participate in the performance. If they aren't able to sing, but feel comfortable standing with their class, they could hold a sign that has the song title on it. They could even hold it over their face if they are really struggling. I bet no one in the audience would think anything of it. If your child is reward motivated, you could create a reward system for any song they hold the sign with their face showing they get "X." If they aren't comfortable signing the songs, they could hum the song. Have them stand next to someone in the class they are the most comfortable with to help lower anxiety. Practice the songs at home, and if possible, practice on the stage where they will be performing. Talk about these performances in an upbeat manner. Accept what they can do and support them at whatever capacity they can participate. Be proud of their accomplishments so they feel confident in what they can do.

Schools will often times have a holiday party which causes a change to the daily routine. Try to get in contact with the teacher to find out what the party routine is going to be and what is going to be involved in the party. Also, if it fits with your schedule, see if you they need any parent volunteers. Prepare your child as much as possible based on what the teacher shared with you. If they have a good friend in class, ask for them to be paired up and keep them on the edge of activities instead of in the middle of it. Teachers can also help the student in the planning or decorating process to give them confidence in wanting to join the festivities. Communication, preparation, and a positive outlook could be what your SM child needs to enjoy a holiday party at school.

The holidays are meant to be a joyous time of year to celebrate with loved ones. Let's make sure that ALL of us have the opportunity to enjoy this wonderful time of year. Talk with your SM child about what they are most worried about and work alongside them to help them work through it at their level. Be their biggest supporter and celebrate every win no matter how minimal it may seem to you. Happy Holidays to each and every one of you! If you have any questions about Selective Mutism, don't hesitate to reach out to me via email at [smhelp2020@gmail.com](mailto:smhelp2020@gmail.com) or send me a message on Facebook or Instagram. Take Care.

Extra resources:

<https://www.smhelp.org/parent-resources.html>

Resource put together by the SMart Center: [https://1spi7i2ub3g13lcih52tbunj-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/selective mutism center smart holiday preparations and practic alities.pdf](https://1spi7i2ub3g13lcih52tbunj-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/selective%20mutism%20center%20smart%20holiday%20preparations%20and%20practic%20alities.pdf)