

Episode 13 – Tips to Prevent Regression During a Holiday Break

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 will be giving tips on how to support a child with SM during the school holiday break coming up. Plus, I'll be sharing an exciting new service Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. will be able to offer starting January 1st. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 13 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. During a recent parent coaching session, we began talking about the struggles that come with our SM kids being away from school for so long over the holiday school break. There is the issue of getting into a different routine, trying not to have too much communication regression when they go back, and trying to avoid school refusal issues when it is finally time to go back.

Let's start with talking about how to support our kids as they move away from a fairly predictable schedule they have at school to a looser schedule while at home during break. If your kids are like our SM daughter, they probably thrive on a set routine and when that routine gets switched up, there seems to be many more emotional outburst and problem behavior that occurs. As a parent, it is important to be ready for some challenging behaviors and to make sure you understand that your child is not deliberately trying to be difficult. I wish someone would have told me that years ago. I always went into a school break with a vision of us having so much fun and doing all these great family activities, but then I would get broadsided with a lot of attitude and lack of compliance. It made me feel like my daughter wanted absolutely nothing to do with me and didn't care about what I needed from her during the day. What I've learned over the years is that our kids are overwhelmed by the lack of routine. Their anxiety may make it hard for them to know which activity they want to do at a particular moment. They may not feel comfortable going in their room by themselves to play or they may want to do everything all at the same time and get frustrated with having to choose just one thing. One of the best tips we got through Occupational Therapy was the value of creating a daily schedule. And not just the parent creating the schedule for the child, but for the child to help create the daily schedule. This will help give the child a sense of control of how the day will go and it will allow them to see ahead of time what will be happening, so they aren't surprised by anything. This can be especially helpful when you will be going somewhere for a holiday celebration or if people will be coming to your house. Make sure to listen to episode 11 to learn how to prepare your SM child for those holiday events to keep their anxiety level low which will hopefully increase the likelihood of them communicating.

We created a rather large board to help make our schedule. Each day of the week had its own column, and each column was separated into morning, afternoon, and evening. For each part of the day we had things that had to be done such as eat breakfast, get dressed, brush teeth, etc and then we had numerous other activities our kids could choose from. Our kids would choose the order of the tasks that had to be done – they were on green cards – and then they would choose the order of the various activities they wanted to do for the rest of the time – these were on orange cards. We had various activities such as going to the park, playing a card game, baking, playing video games, watching a movie, going on a bike ride and so on. It

actually made it easier on me as a parent because I wasn't having to find things for them to do and I didn't have to hear how there was nothing to do or that they were so bored. We could look at the schedule and know exactly what we would be doing. We also had it set so our kids would alternate days of who gets to choose the order of activities for the day. Monday, Wednesday, Fridays would be our son, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday would be our daughter, and Dad and I would get Sundays. That way our SM daughter was learning that it isn't always about her and that she can learn to do what other people want to do. I have a video of our board on the Selective Mutism HELP Facebook page and I'll leave a link in the episode notes so you can see what ours looked like.

Another concern that can come up is the possibility of your child regressing in the way they had been communicating before they went on a long school break. Before break starts, talk to your child's teacher to see if they would be willing to send a video message or an email a couple times throughout the break to keep the relationship strong. Depending on how they are communicating to the teacher in school, try to continue that method during break. They could send a video message back to the teacher, an audio message, a picture, or an email. Also, talk with the principal to see if anyone will be working at the school during the break – janitors, front desk staff, or any childcare services that will be there. If someone will be there, see if you could stop in with your child a few times over break. The goal would be for you as the parent to have your child talk in various areas of the school. Ask them to give you a tour and show you where the gym is, the library, their classroom, etc. Again, if their anxiety is lowered with a parent around, they may have a better opportunity to communicate. It could be the first time they ever have a chance to actually talk in the school. Keep it fun and upbeat and if they are reward motivated, create rewards around speaking in the different areas of the school. If the school is not open, maybe try going to the playground or walk around the building or even sit in your car in the parking lot and hang out and talk.

If your child has started talking to classmates, see if they can come over for a playdate during the break. If your child hasn't started talking to anyone in class yet, ask them who they would want to talk to from their class. If they pick a name or two, try to contact the parents to see if they could drop their child off for a little bit to play at your house. I know it can be awkward and forward to contact a parent and ask for them to drop their child off, but it can really make such a difference in helping your child speak not only to a peer, but to start speaking in school. If a parent isn't comfortable dropping their child off for an extended amount of time, offer to buy coffee for them if they will go pick it up. That way you'll have some time to work one on one with facilitating conversation between your child and their friend before the parent comes back. Another way to help a child with speaking to classmates is through an app like Facebook Messenger for kids. During the Covid lockdown our daughter used this with her friends and cousins and it really helped unlock her voice. They have various games that can be played without speaking – one of them was to make a character jump over obstacles by opening their mouths. They also have games where you can draw a picture and the other person guesses what it is or "Would You Rather" type questions. They can also send audio recordings and video recordings to help with progression of different types of communication.

Finally, I'll talk about ways to hopefully prevent school refusal when it's time to go back. It was always really hard for our daughter to be ready to go back to school. She would have stomachaches the nights leading up to going back, her throat would start to hurt, and her emotions would be all over the place. Their brain is making them think that terrible things are going to happen when they go back. They are going to envision all sorts of crazy things that

could happen when they go back. It's our job as parents to reel them in and help them see the difference between reality and their brain trying to trick them. When they are in a calm state of mind – we usually choose bedtime – have them visualize themselves walking into school. Have them visualize themselves walking up to the doors, having them take a deep breath as they either open the door themselves or walk through it, then visualize themselves walking down the hallway to their class, putting their backpack away, finding their seat, listening to morning announcements, working in their workbooks, etc. Do your best to keep them calm as they visualize. If they start to get emotional, take some deep breaths focus on the details of the areas they were visualizing. They could try making a fist and squeezing and releasing to help relieve some tension. The goal of these exercises is for their brain to be prepared for going back. They will have hopefully created new neuropathways that lead them down a path of calm instead of a path of uncertainty. Another tool they could use is the power of distraction. This was also discussed in the Parent Coaching session I had. This would entail coming up with a type of scavenger hunt for when they go back. They could count the number of steps it takes from them to get from the entrance to their classroom. They could count the number of doors they pass on the way to the cafeteria. Or write down how many kids had a shirt with the color red on it. You could even start doing scavenger hunts during break so they get the hang of it and have an understanding of how they can earn fun rewards for completing them.

I think the best piece of advice I can give is to try to give your child a bit of grace. Easier said than done. I always try to be as honest and as transparent with you as possible and I can admit that I struggle with handling the emotional outbursts our daughter has due to her anxiety. If I can take a few moments to see the world through her eyes, it helps in my understanding of why she is acting the way she is. I do what I can to let her know that I'm proud of all she does, to face her greatest fear day in and day out. I try to inform her that there are probably many kids that are nervous to go back to school and that it is perfectly normal. I will also give her something that she can wear during the day to let her know that even if I'm not with her, I'm thinking of her. When she was really little, I would draw a heart on her hand and a heart on my hand. I would tell her whenever she wanted to give me a hug that all she had to do was press on her heart button and I would feel her give me a hug. We would practice and when she pressed her button, I would act out what it felt like when I got a hug from her. As she got older, I made special matching bracelets for us to wear. The one she wore said "Be Brave" and mine had a simple heart on it. She could fidget with the bracelet during class and know that I was feeling it on my bracelet as well.

I mentioned at the beginning of this podcast that I have a new service I will be offering starting in January. In addition to being a stay at home mom, the creator and sole employee of Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. and the producer of this podcast, I am also in grad school to become a Behavior Analyst. As a Behavior Analyst I will have the opportunity to treat those affected with Selective Mutism. Many of you may be thinking, how could a behavior analyst help someone with Selective Mutism? Well, I'll save that answer for another podcast episode. But for now, I can tell you that I wouldn't be putting all this work into school if it wasn't possible. As part of becoming Board Certified I will be needing to accrue a specific number of supervised hours to sit for the board exams. So, starting in January, I will be able to start offering behavioral services to those with Selective Mutism and my services will be under the supervision of an SM specialist. My understanding is that at this time I can only treat those children living in states that do not require licensing. I will have a list of those states on my website, so make sure to head to www.smhelp.org and click on Behavioral Services for more

information. I am so excited to start helping kids show everyone around them how amazing they are one small step at a time. I know in my heart that everyone can overcome their SM, they just need to find the right support at the right moment. As always, if you have questions for me you can send me an email at smhelp2020@gmail.com or send a message on Facebook or Instagram. For more information on parent coaching, past and future Online Summits, past podcasts, and now behavioral services, visit www.smhelp.org. Take care.