Episode 14 – How can a Behavior Analyst help someone 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 will be talking about behavior analysis and how a behavior analyst could help someone with Selective Mutism. Let’s get started.

Welcome to episode 14 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. As we traveled along our daughter’s path of her Selective Mutism journey, I realized just how few therapists were out there that had an understanding of SM. I had a heavy heart knowing there were so many children suffering in silence because for one reason or another they weren’t getting the support they needed. It was time for me to do what I could to change that. I began connecting with different professionals to figure out a new career path so I could help those affected by Selective Mutism. I talked with psychologists, occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, but those professions didn’t seem to be able to provide what I was looking for in my schooling and for my future career. At the Selective Mutism Association’s annual conference in 2019 I was fortunate enough to meet a Board Certified Behavior Analyst. This was the first time I had ever heard of this profession and I was very interested to learn more about it.

The part that intrigued me the most at the beginning was that since I already had a 4 year undergrad degree, I would only need to go to school for 2 years instead of the 4 years of the other professions. I’m not getting any younger and with already having two degrees, the less schooling needed was something that was important to me. I reached out to a BCBA-D which is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst – Doctorate, a BCBA which is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, and a BCaBA which is a Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst all of which treated those with Selective Mutism. They helped me get an even better understanding of the different levels of behavior analysts and pointed me in the right direction of a great graduate program.

In August 2020, I started the BCBA graduate degree program at Florida Institute of Technology. I really didn’t know anything about behavior analysis, but as I’ve progressed through my courses, I’ve learned just how much it could help someone with Selective Mutism. So what type of treatment do behavior analysts do? I hope I don’t lose you when I say this, but the type of treatment is called Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA. Before you roll your eyes and switch off this podcast, please hear me out. There is, unfortunately, a lot of negativity towards ABA within the Autism community. And, unfortunately, not every person who offers ABA does a great job. They may not be looking at their client as an individual and may only be doing interventions that they’ve always used. This could create a situation where the client isn’t getting the best services. But, there is so much to behavior analysis that can really benefit so many people. ABA is about understanding antecedents and consequences – what happens before and after a behavior occurs. It’s about understanding how the environment can change a person’s behavior.

Let’s look at a child with Selective Mutism and how their environment affects their behavior. When the child is at home with mom and dad they are able to talk freely. When they talk they feel fine and don’t feel anxious. Now, let’s change the environment and talk about that same child in school. Suddenly they begin to feel anxious. When they feel anxious their throat begins to tighten, their stomach begins to hurt, they feel ice running through their veins and they are not able to speak. Since the environment changed, their behavior ended up changing. As a behavior analyst we need to recognize that the environment is changing the child’s behavior and then begin modifying the environment to bring them back to their “normal” behavior they had when they were at home with mom and dad. So, how can we do that? We can use techniques such as shaping which is also used in a psychologist’s repertoire. We can use movement techniques which is used in an occupational therapist’s repertoire. Many of the techniques a Behavior Analyst uses are very similar as other practices, they just may have a different name. The behavior analyst could also do a fading in or sliding in technique. They could ask the teachers to withhold asking certain types of questions such as open ended questions – this is a way of changing the environment. The environment is more than the physical things we see, it’s what we encounter externally and what we feel internally. A behavior analyst could even help change the child’s internal environment by having them practice deep breathing or tension/relaxation exercises. There are so many possibilities of helping a child with selective mutism with behavioral analytic techniques. Now, I’m not saying that any behavioral analyst can treat a child with selective mutism. For example, I was talking to a parent recently whose child had a BCBA within the school helping them. The only way for that child to communicate was writing. However, because the BCBA didn’t have a thorough understanding of selective mutism, he changed the environment by removing the ability for the child to write and was only going to allow him to speak. Yikes, that’s pretty much the worst thing that can be done. Needless to say the child is not speaking in school yet. But, if the BCBA would have had the understanding that the child is able to write in school, they could have gradually faded out writing and fade in speaking.

People may also say that ABA is only about motivating a child with pieces of food, toys, or time on an iPad. They wouldn’t be wrong necessarily, but they also wouldn’t be completely right either. This would speak to the consequence part of behavior analysis. If a certain behavior occurs, what happens immediately after it and how does that affect the likelihood of that behavior occurring again in the future? You may have heard the terms positive or negative reinforcement. Many people think that positive means good and negative means bad. But, in behavior analysis, it’s more of a math term with positive meaning added to and negative meaning removed from. Reinforcement means that the behavior is likely to continue in the future. So, if someone is getting positive reinforcement after a behavior, it means something is getting added to their environment, such as a statement of praise or a brave ticket, and the behavior is likely to continue in the future. Negative reinforcement means something is removed from their environment and the behavior will continue. The best example of this is when I would rescue my daughter when someone asked her a question. Someone asks a question, and she freezes, I see how uncomfortable she is, so I answer for her and the attention is taken away from her. The attention is taken away – so the negative part – and it increases the likelihood that the next time someone asks her a question she is going to wait because I will eventually answer – that’s the reinforcement part.

At the beginning of most therapy sessions if we are trying to motivate a young child, generally we are going to be rewarding them with things they like to keep them wanting to do things that are hard. Over time the amount of rewards usually decreases and the child begins to be motivated by how it makes them feel inside – this is called intrinsic motivation. One example of this would be when we started having our daughter communicate at school. If she answered yes/no to a teacher for the first time she would get 2 brave tickets, after that she would get 1 brave ticket. She could then cash those brave tickets in for special rewards – in the behavior analysis world this is called a token economy. At first she only needed 3 brave tickets to get ice cream, then it was 5 tickets, and eventually we stopped using ice cream as a motivator because she was able to do the task on her own and didn’t need the motivator anymore. So yes, it may seem like in ABA a child is just getting a ton of rewards, but if the analyst is good at what they are doing and understand how the token economy works, they should be altering the stipulations on how the child is rewarded and guiding them towards being intrinsically motivated.

I hope I’ve given you some new insight as to what behavior analysts do. The most important thing to find out from a professional you are considering – whether it’s a psychologist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, or behavior analyst – is to find out what their experience and understanding is of Selective Mutism. If they don’t have any experience or understanding, ask them if they are willing to learn. If you listened to my podcast about Occupational Therapy, you’ll remember that our daughter’s OT had never worked with someone with SM, yet she was willing to learn and she was a huge help to our daughter.

I’m excited to announce that I am now offering Family Coaching Sessions in addition to Parent Coaching Sessions. Family Coaching will allow me to not only help you as the parent navigate this journey, but I will also be able to use my knowledge of Behavior Analysis to help your child. Part of my requirements to sit for the Board Exams is to have a certain number of supervised hours. This means that I will be meeting with a supervisor overseeing the coaching sessions I’m doing to help better prepare me for the day I can officially open up my practice. This could be great for you, because not only would you get services from me, but you would have an additional SM specialist to get help from – think of it as a two for one deal! I have all the information on my website which is [www.smhelp.org](http://www.smhelp.org), just click on the Family Coaching tab. I’ll leave a link in the episode notes. As always if you have any questions for me, send me an email at [smhelp2020@gmail.com](mailto:smhelp2020@gmail.com) or send a message via Facebook, Instagram, and now Linked In. Take care.

For information about Behavioral Services through Selective Mutism H.E.L.P., click this link: <https://www.smhelp.org/family-coaching.html>