

## **Episode 19 – Making the Most Out of Summer for an SM Child**

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 what can be done over the summer months to help prepare a child with SM for a new school year and how to set them up for success. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 19 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. Just when your child is starting to get comfortable in their classroom, the year is ending and they have to get ready to start a new year. This can be a really stressful time as a parent to try to figure out how to keep the momentum going if the child is speaking in school and just as stressful if your child hasn't started speaking yet because another year has gone by with no changes. Luckily, there are lots of things that can be done over the summer to get them ready for a brave new school year!

First things first, tell your child how proud you are of them. Every day they had to go to a place that was scary and anxiety provoking for them. Every day they were in an environment where they couldn't communicate like everyone else. Every day they had to figure out a way to get their needs met when they weren't able to speak. These are some of the strongest, bravest kids out there and they need to be recognized for it. Tell them how much they've accomplished academically, socially, and independently. Tell them they can do anything!

Now let's talk about strategies to help them prepare for the next school year. The first strategy is to try doing a meet and greet with all of the next year's teachers and try to find the best match for your child. Try to find someone that is nurturing, calm, gentle, and understanding. Usually the current teacher will have an idea of who will be best based on the different personalities and teaching styles of the other teachers. But it's nice to have input from the child as well to give them more ownership of making decisions on who they think will be best for them.

Once you know who the teacher is going to be, see if they would be willing to send an "About Me" video to your child. The child can come up with the questions to ask the teachers and then email it to the teacher. The teacher can video record themselves answering the questions and send the video back. Your child could then send the teacher an "About Me" video and talk about things they like and don't like, what they plan on doing over the summer, and what they are looking forward to for the next school year – or whatever information they'd like to share.

Then, as the school year gets closer and the teachers begin to go back for the year to get the classroom ready. Spend some time in the classroom with the teacher there. This is a great time to practice sliding-in or fading-in. Basically, you and your child would be in the classroom playing a game or doing an activity. As the parent, your job is to keep your child talking while the teacher comes in and out of the classroom, while the teacher is in one area of the classroom working on something, while the teacher begins to watch what you are doing, while

the teacher begins to comment on what you are doing. The goal of this is to transfer speech from your child talking to you to your child talking to the teacher. By slowly introducing the teacher to the child's environment, the anxiety is more manageable than if the teacher comes right over and starts asking a bunch of questions. Once the child seems comfortable with the teacher, they can work on a project together or go make copies or deliver something to another classroom. We want our child to be comfortable talking to teacher when you aren't there. The more teachers you can meet with ahead of time, the better. But, if time is limited, the main teacher would be the one to start with.

You may be thinking there is no way a teacher is going to allow you to come in and disrupt all the things they need to do get ready for the new year. But, if you are honest with them and specific about what you are trying to accomplish, they may be eager to have you come in. In the end, it's going to make their job easier if your child's anxiety is lowered around the teacher before the school year even starts. If they are still reluctant, you can try sweetening the deal by telling them you'll do some laminating or cutting or organizing – some sort of robotic, mundane task that they need help with. If possible, ask the teacher first, then ask the principal – the teacher is more likely to say yes.

Next, ask your child which friends they would want in their class next year. Are there any particular classmates they are comfortable talking to? Are there any neighborhood kids that they will be spending time with over the summer that are in the same grade? These are the kids that should be with them in their class for the next year. Your child can use their friends as a talking bridge to start talking to their teachers or other classmates. Whoever the other children are, try to set up playdates with them over the summer or have them be in the same summer camp. We want our children to feel comfortable talking with a friend in different situations so they know if they need to tell someone something, they can at least get a message to their friend and their friend can tell the teacher. Let the administrators know the list of students so they can keep them together.

I know summers can get really busy with vacations, sports, and family get togethers, so it may not be possible to get together in person for play dates. We had great success with using Facebook Messenger for Kids when our daughter was in early elementary school. There were a lot of fun games she could play with her friends, there were different filters to use to change her voice, there were drawing games and would you rather question prompts and the best part was we could manage who she could connect with, which is really important in this day and age. Because our daughter was comfortable talking to her friends virtually, she became comfortable talking to them in person when school started.

I would also recommend talking with the secretary or principal of the school and ask if you can continue to visit the school at least once a week. Some schools have a summer program which keeps the school open, sometimes the principal or other staff members are working throughout the summer, or janitorial staff will be there cleaning classrooms and getting things ready for the next school year. If someone is there, see if you can pop in once a week to keep your child familiar with the school. Sometimes children won't speak at school because they have never done it before and they don't know what will happen when you do. As a parent, this is a great way to be with your child and help them see that they can talk in school just like they can talk at

home. When we did this, we would go on a day when the summer program was on a field trip and eat lunch in the lunch room, read books in the library, run around the gym, and spend time in her classroom. Each different location we were in I kept her talking. I would ask open ended questions, we would play a game, we would read a book out loud, or count our steps. This was teaching her brain that she is safe to speak in school.

If there is absolutely no way for you and your child to be in the school over the summer, there is another option. Take a bunch of pictures of the child's new classroom – where the lockers or cubby area is, how the desks are arranged, where the teacher's desk is, what the front of the classroom looks like, where the bathroom is, etc. Then, over the summer, review the photos. Talk about the different things in the room. Have them point to the desk they would want to sit in. Talk to them about where the teacher will probably stand when they're talking. You could take videos of the school as well. Take videos of them walking down the hallway, going into the lunch room, the gym, the library, the music room, the art room, the bathrooms. Lucy Nathanson with Confident Children just did a great Live Facebook Video and she said to make the unknown known. Basically, have video or picture documentation that will answer all the questions that are going to come up before the first day of school.

If your child is new to school or changing schools, the same things apply. Get into the school and talk with them like you talk to them at home. If they begin to whisper, tell them you can't hear them because of the acoustics of the hallways or that you have some fluid buildup in your ear. We want them to see that they can use their normal speaking voice in an unfamiliar area. You could even play a game by having the child stay in one spot, you go down the hall maybe 15-20 steps and ask them how many steps do you think it will take to get to you? In order for you to hear their answer they know they'll have to talk really loud so you can hear their answer. Then have them count their steps out loud and see how close they were with their guess. Keep the time in the school fun and engaging.

Starting kindergarten is a big challenge for any child and an even bigger challenge for a child with SM. Again, make the unknown known. Ask the teacher what a typical day looks like – we got a weekly calendar with the different specials and times when the different subjects would be taught. We found out how the lunch situation works – if she brings a lunch from home where does it go, if she wants lunch at school what does she need to do? We found where the bathrooms were – most classrooms have a bathroom within the classroom which makes it really convenient. As a side note, some kids will not want to use a bathroom in the classroom because they are afraid the other kids are going to hear them. They may need to use a bathroom outside the classroom, so show them where that would be. Or, have them use the bathroom in the classroom while you are standing outside of it and tell them you couldn't hear them, or teach them to run the water in the sink to drown out any sound they think people will hear. Remind them that when 15-20 kids are in the classroom they are going to be so loud and busy working on stuff to even realize that you are in the bathroom at all.

It can be awkward to ask parents to set up play dates with their child and your child, but more than likely, the other parent is going to be thrilled that their child is going to know someone at school. Again, a majority of kids are nervous and scared to start Kindergarten, so it would only benefit them by meeting a fellow classmate. If possible, set up play dates first at your house

where your child is most comfortable, then move it to the school playground. And, if you've already been in the school with your child, ask the staff if you can bring a friend in so your child can give them a tour of the school or eat lunch in the cafeteria.

Riding the bus can be a big anxiety inducer for kids, especially if they are riding the bus for the first time. A suggestion I found was to contact the bus station and ask if you can come in and get a tour of one of the buses. Maybe they could do a test run – if the driver is going to be doing a test run of the route, see if they could pick you and your child up, drive them to the school, and bring you back. Or, get a ride around the parking lot or down the street from the bus station and back. Also, talk to the bus driver ahead of time to make them aware that your child has selective mutism and they may not be able to speak on the bus. Have them sit your child near the front so they don't get left behind if they forget to get off at their stop – a valid fear for parents to worry about. Ask the driver to give a little note to your child with information about them and have your child do the same for them. If your child likes to color, draw, or read, send them with something to do on the bus ride so they can take their mind off all the worries. Try to pair them up with another peer or a responsible older neighbor kid that could look out for them.

Now, if your child is anything like mine, she hates not having a routine. She doesn't do well with finding things to do, she needs to follow a schedule. Summer can be really hard on them and you may see an increase in unwanted behavior. Setting up a daily schedule can make all the difference. We had a pretty elaborate one at one point. With our two kids we had them be responsible for the schedule every other day. When it was their day, they would decide what we would do. I had little cards that had things that had to get done like eating breakfast, getting dressed, brushing their teeth, etc. They would choose the order to do those things. Then, they would select from another set of cards activities they wanted to do. I had things like riding bikes, playing Legos, going on a walk, going to the park, playing Simon says, baking, playing play-do, all sorts of different activities. They would then place the activities they wanted to do on the board and we would do that. What was nice about the every other day part was that my daughter had to learn to be ok doing what someone else wants to do. She has a tendency to want to control what happens, and this helped her work on having a flexible brain and listening to what others wanted. I have a video showing our board on my Facebook page, I'll leave a link the episode notes if you want to see what it looked like.

<https://www.facebook.com/SelectiveMutismHELP/videos/2158980510902708>

The summer is also a great time to do lots of different exposures. Check with your local library to see if they have any fun programs in the summer. Ours had different magic shows and animals shows and story times that we would attend. See if the local bowling alley or movie theater has any summer deals. Maybe there are some weekly camps or vacation bible schools to check out. All of these things can keep the momentum going for your child to keep speaking in other situations. Set up goals and a reward system. It may be an opportunity for them to meet other kids that will be in their class as well.

If your kids are going to a summer camp, try to do a tour before it starts. See where they will be during the day, where they will eat, where the bathrooms are. Try to meet some of the

counselors and just like you did with the teacher and the bus driver, give them an about me handout and ask them to write about themselves to give to your child. Make sure the counselors know to not expect your child to speak, and to build a rapport with them first. Then have them ask yes/no questions, then forced choice, then open ended questions. Keep it fun and positive!

I hope you all have a wonderful summer! If you are looking for specific tips to help your child, I offer parent coaching where we can come up with strategies that will work best for your unique child. You can learn more by going to [www.smhelp.org](http://www.smhelp.org) and clicking on the Parent Coaching tab. Don't forget, tomorrow, May 20<sup>th</sup>, the free online summit starts! You can still register by going to [www.smhelp.org/free-summit](http://www.smhelp.org/free-summit). I'm here in anyway you need support and can be reached via Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn or by emailing me at [smhelp2020@gmail.com](mailto:smhelp2020@gmail.com). Take care.