

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 selective mutism is and the tell-tale signs that a child in your life may or may not have selective mutism. Let's get started.

Welcome to the first episode 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. On this episode, I will be sharing with you things we noticed from our daughter when she was young and how we realized that she was struggling with Selective Mutism. To start, I'll give you a quick definition of Selective Mutism. Selective Mutism, or SM, is an anxiety disorder that prevents a person from communicating in certain situations. Generally it is a young child who is unable to speak in a school setting. But, I want you to know, that SM can affect a person at any age, it can affect more than just speaking, since speaking isn't the only way to communicate, and it can affect a person anywhere they feel anxious, not just in school.

Now, I want to tell you about our daughter and what Selective Mutism looked like to her. She was a typically developing, maybe even an over-achieving, baby and toddler. She crawled early, walked early, and talked early. Looking back, she probably started showing signs of SM around one year old which is when we took her to get her one year photos taken. She was so adorable in her cute little dress, but she would not show her personality or smile for the photographer. No matter the silly things the photographer tried to do to get our daughter to smile, she wouldn't crack! At the time we didn't think anything of it, we just figured she didn't like the photographer for whatever reason.

As she got older, she still seemed like a typically developing toddler. But, whenever we got together with extended family – grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins – she never spoke or engaged with them. She would play next to her cousins which is typical for young kids, but she never babbled or pointed to toys. Again, we figured she was shy with them as we didn't see them very often.

When our daughter was 3 she started preschool. We talked with the teacher ahead of time and let her know that our daughter was really smart – she knew all her letters and numbers and was even starting to read sight words - but also really quiet. Her teacher, who had been teaching for over 30 years, said that some kids that are really academic may need extra time for the social part of

their brain to catch up. It made sense to us and as we watched the teacher try to get a picture of our daughter who looked painfully awkward doing so, we were hopeful that after some time we would see our daughter come out of her shell.

Unfortunately, time did not change anything, which is another component of the definition of SM. If a child goes more than 1 month without speaking in a school setting, they may need to be evaluated for selective mutism. Our daughter went over a year and a half without talking to anyone at school and no one ever mentioned Selective Mutism to us. I think a lot of the confusion can come from how a child with SM acts at school. For our daughter, she was very pleasant in class – she was attentive, followed directions, showed kindness to others, and appeared happy and content. I think when most people think about someone with anxiety, they think of someone that is withdrawn, upset, crying, and not engaging, but that was not our daughter.

During conferences with our daughter’s teacher during the second year of preschool, we asked if there were any topics discussed about vehicles or kids being alone. The teacher looked very confused and said “no, nothing like that, why do you ask?” Well, after our daughter turned 4, she began exhibiting extreme separation anxiety when we pumped gas. She would cry, demand to have the windows down (it was the middle of winter in Minnesota, so that wasn’t the best idea), and needed to make sure she could see us at all times. We mentioned to the teacher that we thought maybe she had anxiety and she was shocked that we thought that as our daughter seemed so content and happy in class.

We realized that it wasn’t just in school that our daughter wasn’t talking. At four years old she was only talking to one grandparent on a consistent basis and it was her grandparent that did daycare for her for the first 3 years of her life. She wouldn’t talk on the phone, she wouldn’t talk to the neighbor kids, she wouldn’t respond to a worker at a store. The way she looked was the typical appearance of an SM child – frozen, hands up by her face or mouth, gaze towards the ground, and no responding when asked a question. It was heartbreaking to see her grandma come visit and have our daughter not interact with her. Grandmas are the best, but no matter how many sweet treats or presents her Grandma brought, our daughter had the same body position – frozen, hands by her mouth, gaze towards the ground, and no responding.

Since selective mutism still wasn’t something we knew about, we could only assume that our child was being a stinker and she just didn’t want to talk to certain people – because, believe me, that girl could talk and talk and talk when she wanted to!

I was beginning to be impatient with her not talking at school. I told her teacher that if our daughter didn't answer a question she asked, that she just needed to walk away from my daughter and not give her the time of day. Not my finest parenting moment, I'll admit, but I didn't know what else to do. Her preschool teacher was very sweet and never gave up on our daughter, so needless to say, she did not follow my request.

Six months into our daughter's second year of preschool while I was working front desk at a children's clinic, I randomly came across the diagnosis of Selective Mutism. And if I'm being completely honest, the reason it caught my attention was because I read it as Selective Mutation. I thought, is this a disorder where something on the DNA/RNA chain is mutated and causes something? Well, thankfully Google autocorrected mutation into mutism and I got this definition: **Selective mutism** is a severe anxiety disorder where a person is unable to speak in certain social situations, such as with classmates at school or to relatives they do not see very often. BINGO! This was it! I immediately sent my husband a text, then ran back to the pediatrician working that day. I said, "I think my daughter has selective mutism, what can you tell me about it?" His answer was not what I expected. He said "hmm, I don't know if it's a real thing. Just give her until kindergarten and she'll probably outgrow it." Huh, that didn't feel right. Instead of working that afternoon, I started researching SM. I found the Selective Mutism Questionnaire which I'll post in the podcast notes and I selected never for just about every question.

Needless to say, our daughter had Selective Mutism! It was like a weight had been lifted off our shoulders to know that our daughter wasn't just a little stinker and being rude, but that she had an anxiety disorder that was preventing her to speak. I'll get into our therapy experience in a future podcast, but for now I want to recap with you what defining characteristics brought us to the realization that she had SM.

First, she would only talk to me, her dad, her brother, and one grandparent. If another person was in the room that she didn't talk to, she wouldn't talk to us in those instances.

Second, when she was put on the spot to talk, she would freeze, her hands would come up by her mouth, her gaze would be down and away, and she would in no way communicate to that person.

Third, she could not smile for a picture if it was taken by someone other than me or her dad. School pictures were not what we expected before we understood what was going on. I'll put a link to the SM help website for you to take a look.

Finally, she showed some strong separation anxiety issues and bedtime was very difficult for her. We realized that in her mind, if something were to happen to us and we weren't with her she would not be able to talk to anyone. She needed us around so she could communicate her wants and needs and she knew she wouldn't be able to do that with anyone else.

If you have questions about Selective Mutism, visit www.smhelp.org or feel free to send me an email at smhelp2020@gmail.com. If you are on social media, you can Like Selective Mutism HELP on Facebook and Instagram, I'll include link below.

I also wanted to give you a special discount code if you are interested in lifetime access to any of the Selective Mutism Help Online Summits I have hosted in the past. If you use the code "podcast1" all lower case letters with the number 1, at check out, you will save 25% on either the entire 2020 Summit or the entire Spring 2021 Summit.

Thank you so much for joining me today and I hope you join me for the next Selective Mutism HELP Home Education Learning Program Podcast!