

Episode 22 – The Power of Parent Support Groups

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 sharing how important it was for us to have support from other parents navigating a similar SM journey as ours. Plus, I'll share an announcement about new Parent Support Groups that Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. will have available starting in September. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 22 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. When a parent hears their child has a diagnosis of a rare disorder, there is instant fear, uncertainty, worry, guilt, and so many other emotions. Selective Mutism is a rare anxiety disorder that not many teachers, pediatricians, or other parents know about. We probably don't have people within our close circle to ask for advice or discuss our concerns. Luckily, we are in an age where information and resources are at our fingertips. One of the first things I did when I found out about our daughter having Selective Mutism, was asked a question about SM in a local Mom's Facebook Group. From that post I had a recent graduate student reach out to me who did her dissertation on Selective Mutism and she was able to point me in the direction of the Selective Mutism Association. From there I was able to find a treating professional in our area and sent an email the same day.

At the beginning, that's all I thought I needed. I thought I just needed a professional to help my child and we would be good to go. After a couple weeks I soon realized I needed way more help. The psychologist clearly knew a lot about SM and since I really didn't know anything, most sessions I felt incapable of helping our daughter. I felt like I wasn't doing enough and that my previous parenting style was all wrong and that I was responsible for our daughter's SM because of it. There were a lot of emotions I was feeling and I wasn't sure if I should even be feeling them. Was I being too sensitive? Was I not understanding SM well enough to help our daughter? What more should I be doing? Again I went to a Facebook Group and this time I went to the Parents of Children with Selective Mutism Group and asked if there was anyone in my state. To my surprise, there was a family that lived only 15 minutes from us! I couldn't believe it! I immediately sent them a message and we arranged to meet at a local playground. It was my first time meeting another parent who had a child with the same diagnosis as our daughter. I had a list of questions prepared, we had an amazing conversation and I felt so good afterwards. She was able to give me tips on what worked for them, what didn't work, and how SM presented in her children. It felt so good to have someone validate the feelings I was feeling and know that those feelings may only be temporary.

From that moment on, I was motivated to find more parents of children with SM in my area. I started a monthly parent support group that met at a local library. These meetings motivated me to research more about SM and to share what I've learned with other families. We were able to have open conversations about the achievements our kids were making and also about

the struggles. Social media is a great way to connect with others, but it can be a very isolating place when you see friends posting all these wonderful moments their children are able to experience and you know your child may never have those moments. Being in a room with parents that have felt that pain and have risen above that pain made my world feel right, if just for a moment.

My motivation to help our daughter continued to increase as did my motivation to help the other parent's children. Knowing there were other families that may be struggling pushed me to keep asking questions, to try new strategies, to open my mind into things I never knew existed and to share what I had learned during our meetings. We laughed, we cried, we strategized, we collaborated, and we built each other up. If it wasn't for the other parents that helped us early on, I don't think I would be here today recording this podcast. They gave me the strength to keep learning and to share that knowledge with others that were starting out on their own SM journey.

Often times a parent of a child with Selective Mutism has their own anxiety they are working through. It may be difficult to voluntarily put themselves in a situation where they may be asked to talk in front of a group of people they have never met. It may be easier to avoid that situation than to go through the stress and anxiety of it. If this sounds like you, I really hope you rise above and push past those thoughts and open yourself up to connecting with others. Even if you are there to listen at first, just being around people who have been through a similar journey, gives you a sense of belonging and community. If you have the opportunity to meet with other parents, I highly suggest taking it!

I remember having so many questions and situations occur that I didn't know how to handle come up and didn't know who to turn to. I knew if I emailed our psychologist she may not get to it right away or make me feel like I should know the answer by now. When we were in session, I usually forgot what I was going to ask or I felt like my question wasn't going to be validated or answered fully. The support group gave me people I could reach out to and get a response from almost immediately. They answered my questions and didn't pass judgement on me for asking them. I wasn't feeling alone and ill-equipped anymore, I had resources.

I think my favorite part of being involved in parent support groups was having a place to share our daughter's victories. My friends didn't understand how big of a deal it was when our daughter was able to whisper "yes" when a cashier asked if she wanted a sticker. They couldn't understand fully as to why I would get emotional when our daughter spoke to her friend for the first time. But the people that did understand and cried along with me were the ones who were going through the same thing. And to hear their child's victories and know that one day soon enough our daughter would have victories like that kept us moving forward and motivated to keep going.

In the 4.5 years since our journey started, I haven't quit supporting other parents. I know the struggles. I've asked all those "what if" questions. I've worried, I've felt guilty, I've felt alone, I've felt helpless and hopeless. The motivation for me to start hosting free online summits was

to give parents answers to their questions. The motivation for me going back to school to treat kids with SM was for me to be someone parents could trust to help their child when it seemed like there was no one else. The motivation to start Parent Coaching was for a parent to know they had someone they could turn to that would give them real-world advice and answer whatever question they had with no judgement. And now I'm motivated to start facilitating virtual parent support groups, to be able to come full-circle back to the place where I got the most help when I was just starting out on our journey. I've learned a lot over the years and I'm excited to share that information within parent support groups. Registration is now open for parent support groups that will be starting the week of September 5th.

The groups are going to be divided into 5 separate age groups so you can get support from parents that are going through the same life challenges as you are. A parent of a child who is 3 is going to be on a very different part of their journey when compared to a parent who has a child that is 13. I want these support groups to be meaningful, informative, and worthwhile for everyone that joins. Each group will be limited to 6 families, so make sure you register early! This is to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to ask questions and to share what is on their mind and in their heart. Each group will meet for 45 minutes once a week for 4-consecutive weeks. This will allow you to be with the same people each week. To hear about their wins and for you to share yours to a group of people you've been able to form a relationship with and build trust with. The topics discussed will be topics that matter to the group. I will be there to help guide the conversation, to bring resources, and to do research on anything the group has questions about. I hope you join one of the groups so you can feel what it's like to not be alone anymore and to feel hope. For more information and to register for any of the Parent Support Groups go to www.smhelp.org and click on the Parent Support Group tab. As a thank you for being a listener to this podcast, use the code podcast22 (all lower case letters with the number 22 at the end) at checkout to save 10% on any of the Parent Support Groups. As always, if you have any questions, please reach out to me via Facebook, Instagram, Linked-In or email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com. Take care.