

Episode 23 – Preparing a Child with Selective Mutism for Picture Day

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 tips to help prepare your child for picture day to unlock their beautiful smile for all to see. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 23 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. If you are a parent of a child with SM, you know what picture day brings. It brings anxiety to our kids and it brings a picture home of your child that doesn't represent who your child is at all. We had no idea that not being able to smile in a picture was part of SM. But, when there is a certain expectation for a child with SM to communicate, and yes, smiling is a form of communication, the anxiety ramps up and they are unable to smile. Our daughter with SM is our oldest, so her first experience with school picture day was our first experience with school picture day as a parent. I didn't think to do anything different for her that day, especially since this was before we knew about SM. I just assumed she would show her sweet smile that she showed us when we took her picture. When I got her pictures back, I wasn't sure how to feel about them. I think it was because I didn't recognize the little girl in the picture. We talked about having her retake the pictures, but we didn't seem to think anything was going to change. If you want to see her school picture, I'll be posting them in the SM H.E.L.P. Community of Support Facebook Group along with other pictures of how she has transformed over the years. There is a link to the community in the episode notes.

After seeing the pictures, we started reflecting on how she was when other people were taking her picture. In a past podcast episode I believe I talked about how we took our daughter to get her 1 year birthday pictures done with a photographer and she was not able to smile for those pictures. We also thought about the countless times over the years our extended family would take her picture during the holidays or at family functions and usually she was hiding her face or if she was showing her face she looked like a sassy little girl, to put it nicely. It was so out of character for the crazy silly girl she was, so it was really confusing for us. But, now understanding SM, we understand the reasons behind her inability to smile.

The next year when it was time for picture day, we did a better job of preparing her. I found some YouTube videos on what it is like during picture day. It showed the line of kids, the backdrop, the photographer, and kids smiling for their pictures, etc. We practiced visualizing walking to the lunch room where her picture would be taken, we asked if she preferred to be the first or last student to take a picture, we talked about having the photographer look away when they took the picture, and we practiced smiling. We also made sure to let the teacher know what was going to work best. The plan was to have her teacher walk her down before the other classmates and for the photographer to look away when taking the picture. When I went to pick her up that day, her teacher was very proud of our daughter. She said she did a great job and was able to look at the camera and give a slight smile. When we got the pictures back, her

teacher was exactly right. There was a slight smile and she was looking at the camera. It still didn't represent who she was, but it was at least a step in the right direction.

We started to be more intentional with our picture taking. We allowed her to take pictures of other people smiling, we tried to take more pictures of her while we were out and about. We practiced smiling in the mirror. We started using brave tickets to reward her for smiling in pictures. There were a lot of little things that we started doing to lower her anxiety just enough to give her a chance at smiling. By Kindergarten, she had three previous years of picture day, and that year she knocked it out of the park. Finally we were able to have a picture that showed who she was! Every year she has outdone herself and has done an amazing job smiling for pictures. Last year she was at a new school and she was still able to smile – you could tell she was probably experiencing some anxiety, but she pushed through it and we have a sweet picture of her hanging in our kitchen now.

My message for the parents that are out there is to not get discouraged. Let picture day be an opportunity for your child to succeed – whatever that means for them. If it means simply being brave enough to stand in front of the camera, great! If it means they are only able to go into the area and watch the other kids get their pictures taken, that is a win. If they are able to go shopping and pick out a new outfit for picture day, celebrate with them. We are all working on something and for some kids picture day is something they need to work on. As a parent you can be there to encourage them and let them know you will be proud of them no matter what. One thing I've learned over the years is there will always be another picture day. You don't have to feel obligated to purchase pictures every year. Let your child know all you want is for them to do what they know they are capable of doing.

If you ever need help navigating situations like this that come up for your child, I offer parent coaching to help you break down these tricky situations and help you find ways to give your child a win. For more information about parent coaching, visit www.smhelp.org/coaching. Don't forget to join the SM H.E.L.P. Community of Support on Facebook where there is a Facebook Live every Friday where I talk about a topic that the community votes on. As always if you have any questions, please email me as smhelp2020@gmail.com or send me a message on Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn. Take care!