

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 discussing ways to educate the people in your child's life about Selective Mutism. Relatives need to be part of the team to help your child, but it can be really hard as a parent to have those important yet sometimes awkward conversations. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 24 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. I'm sure most of you have been in this situation – You have a family gathering and a relative comes up to your child and says “Hi! How's school going? What? Cat got your tongue?” or “If you don't tell me which cookie you want, you can't have it.” Or maybe even “Ugh, I can't believe how rude your child is. You need to do a better job at teaching him/her manners.” All of these statements are shots to not only your child's confidence, but a shot to your confidence as a parent. As this continues time and time again, resentment may build, family relationships can become strained, and your child may become even more anxious and unable to break through their mutism. As a parent, what do you do? I'm a believer that knowledge is power. Selective Mutism isn't a well-known anxiety disorder which means the majority of the population doesn't know or understand what it is. We as parents need to be the educators.

I remember when we first found out about SM and were trying to wrap our heads around what was going on, we were beginning to see why our daughter was having a hard time communicating where her Grandma. Her grandma is one of the sweetest people out there and loves to give hugs and kisses like many grandma's do. When she came over, she would go to our daughter and say Hi and give her a big hug. Even though she had the best intentions, this would cause our daughter to completely shut down. She couldn't make eye contact with her Grandma, she couldn't smile, and she couldn't reciprocate the hug, she was like a little statue. As I found resources about SM, I would email her different videos and suggestions. I'm not one for confrontations, I don't like telling people what to do, and I don't like coming across as a know-it-all, so it was hard for me to get enough courage to tell my mother-in-law how to interact with our daughter. But, once she learned about SM and understood the reasons behind why our daughter couldn't say Hi or give her a hug, their relationship started to grow. We told her that when she comes over to give a quick Hi to our daughter, then to come see us – myself and my husband. Our daughter needed to be given space and not be put in a situation where someone was making direct eye contact with her and touching her. It was then mine and my husband's job to assess our daughter's anxiety moment by moment and decide how we wanted her to communicate with her grandma. Depending on her anxiety we would ask a yes/no question like do you want to go down to the dock and catch tadpoles with us and Grandma? This was an activity our daughter loved to do and loved nothing more than showing off her tadpole catching skills. When she nodded “Yes” Grandma could then respond with “Wonderful, I can't wait to see how many you can catch.” We would then follow our daughter down to the dock – this gave her the opportunity to own the next environment which is really important. While at the dock my husband would ask our daughter questions, again basing the type of

question asked on her anxiety level. He would start working up towards her answering with a verbal yes/no instead of her nodding her head. Then a forced choice question – did you catch a tadpole or a frog? Every time she answered, Grandma responded without asking a follow-up question. Something like, “That tadpole is so cool looking! You are really good at catching them!” Gradually dad would give more space between our daughter and Grandma and within 20-30 minutes our daughter was able to answer questions directly from Grandma. Ever since that moment, our daughter has been verbal with her Grandma. She was 4.5 years old at that time and at 4.5 years old her Grandma was finally able to have a conversation with her.

If I hadn't taken the time to step out of my comfort zone and educate my mother-in-law about SM, it would have taken much longer for her and our daughter to have the relationship they have now. If you are interested in getting a template with the email I sent her and the videos that she said really helped, send me an email at smhelp2020@gmail.com and I'll send it to you.

Now, my mom had a different perspective of Selective Mutism. My mom did daycare for our kids so our daughter saw her on a daily basis which meant she had no trouble speaking to her. The conversation I had with my mom was very different than the one I had with my mother-in-law because my mom would say “well, she's fine with me. I don't think there is anything wrong.” I had to explain that yes, although she talks fine with you, she isn't talking to others. We need to make sure we aren't answering for her and making sure we aren't leading her everywhere we go – allow her to go first into and out of the school. My dad also helped out with our kids a lot, but our daughter wouldn't directly speak to him. I had to point this out since our daughter would use her voice in front of my dad so they thought she was talking to him. We started practicing speaking to him by starting with calling him on the phone. When my mom was over, they would call him and leave a voice message or answering a question he asked to my mom but loud enough for Grandpa to hear. Once they practiced this, it became easier for our daughter to talk to him in person and they could see a difference in their relationship. Again, this was a hard conversation to have with my mom, but having the conversation and giving them ways to help made a big difference.

Over the next couple years we had to continually educate family members. Whenever we talked to them about SM, they became much more understanding and didn't pressure our daughter anymore. They learned to follow our lead instead of trying to control the conversation and push our daughter to speak. This past summer we went to visit our daughter's great-grandparents and her great-uncle was there who she has never talked to. They've known about her diagnosis now for many years and have taken away the pressure for her to speak. So when we went there, her great-uncle said “Hi” to all of us and our daughter responded with “Hi” back to him. He then asked how she was doing and she said “good.” A little while later, when our daughter was playing with her brothers, he said to us “Wow, I didn't think she was going to respond, but she did! She is doing so great!” He did everything right – he didn't call her out specifically when greeting her, he asked a follow-up question only after she spoke, and he didn't make a big deal out of it in the moment. That doesn't happen by chance. That happens by educating family about SM time and time again.

My challenge to you is to come up with a 30 second “elevator pitch” on how you would respond to someone’s remarks about your child not speaking. Practice this without becoming defensive, or by shutting down yourself. Get to a place where you can say it confidently and matter-of-fact so family and friends will listen with an open mind and not become defensive themselves. Here is an example: Let’s say you have family coming over for a holiday gathering and there is that one relative who always seems to have something to say. You could either call them or send them a text or email depending on how you usually communicate and say something like “Hi, we are looking forward to you coming over. I wanted to tell you a little bit about what we’ve learned about so and so’s diagnosis of Selective Mutism. Most people, including us at the beginning, don’t know what SM is, so I wanted to let you know more about it. SM is an anxiety disorder that prevents a person from speaking in certain situations. You may have noticed in the past when you come over and try to get so and so to answer a question, they shut down and look away. They aren’t being rude, they are in a state of severe anxiety and simply cannot respond. Please don’t take this personally and please don’t try to get him/her to talk. The best thing would be for you to say Hi and then just come talk to us. Eventually he/she will come over and we will work on their communication based on their anxiety level. If or when they do talk, please don’t make a big deal about it and please don’t withhold anything from them if they aren’t able to speak.

Here is another example. Let’s say the relative does say something like “if you don’t tell me which cookie you want you can’t have it.” You could, as kindly as possible, say “Hey, can I talk to you for a second? I know you really want so and so to talk to you, trust me we all do. But, we are working really hard at him/her overcoming their diagnosis of Selective Mutism. This is anxiety disorder that prevents him/her from talking in certain situations. It sounds strange, I know, and I’ve had to do a lot of research on it. But, when you unintentionally demand them to speak in order to get something, it actually makes things much worse. Instead, you could ask him/her to point to the cookie they want or ask if they want the chocolate chip or peanut butter cookie. It may take some time, but the less pressure you put on him/her to speak, the more likely they will.” Hopefully, they will hear the sincerity in your voice and want to be able to help your child.

Another way you could help lower your child’s anxiety is by having a conversation with your child before the get-together. You could say something like “Hey, I know it is really hard for you to talk to so and so when they are here. I just wanted to let you know that you don’t have to. I’ve talked to them already and they know to just say Hi to you and not expect you to say Hi back and to not ask you any questions. If you need anything, you can come and whisper to me or pull me in another room. We want you to be comfortable and have fun while they are here. Does that sound ok?” This won’t be the case every time as we want to keep our children moving forward and not be stuck in only whispering or pulling you into another room. But for this first time that we give them the expectation that they don’t have to talk around them, see if anything changes. Because the expectation to speak has been drastically reduced, their anxiety will likely be reduced. And what happens when their anxiety is reduced? They have a better chance of communicating! If you notice that they are less anxious as previous get togethers, start working up the communication ladder. Ask them yes/no questions so they can

nod, then ask a forced choice question by holding up fingers to answer, then ask a forced choice question and have them answer verbally. Continue to monitor them moment by moment and adjust as necessary. When those relatives see what you are doing and the results that it is having, they are going to have a better understanding of all of it. They are going to realize that your child isn't being rude or willful or controlling or defiant. They will, hopefully, see your child's anxiety melting away and their amazing personality shining through.

This will take time. But again, knowledge is power. The more we can educate our family members in a caring and less defensive way, the more likely they will be able to hear what we have to say. If you want to talk more about this topic or have specific family members you need help with, I'd love to set up a free 30-minute coaching consultation with you. Head to www.smhelp.org/coaching to fill out a consultation form or email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com. Don't forget the Fall 2022 Selective Mutism HELP Online Summit starts October 21st! Get all the details at smhelp.org/free-summit. Take care!