

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 talk to your children about their Selective Mutism. It can be hard to know if you should talk to your kids about their SM or how to explain it to them so they understand. I'll share our story with explaining it to our daughter as well as other ways to help your child make sense of it all. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 25 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. Last month I talked about how to talk to family members about your child's SM. I get asked frequently from parents if they should tell their child about their selective mutism diagnosis. Depending on the age of the child, they may feel like it will be too confusing for them to understand. Parents are also worried about their child being "labeled" and how that is going to affect how they see themselves and how others are going to see them. I had those same questions and those same concerns. I wish I could say there is a blanket statement you can use and all will be well with your child, but unfortunately each child is different and the way they process the information is different. What I can say is that there are many ways you can talk to your child about their SM. I'll first share how we were recommended to tell our daughter. We were recommended to tell our daughter that she had a bully in her brain that was telling her to not talk. We were given an illustration of a little girl tying up a big monster on a chair and that the monster was the one in her brain telling her not to talk and we were going to work on tying it up and getting rid of it. I remember being at home and getting down to her level and saying something like "you know how sometimes you can't talk to people? Well, it's because there is a big bully in your brain and he isn't letting you talk." The look on her face broke my heart and actually caused me to tear up which probably didn't help the situation. She was terrified. Your child may be like ours and is a very literal thinker. This poor little 4.5 year old is now thinking there is this scary thing in her brain that is controlling her. I tried to give her some power back by showing her the picture and explaining that she was the little girl and she was going to be able to tie up that bully so she could talk whenever she wanted to. We went to the store shortly thereafter to buy some white out so as she began using her voice she could white out that bully and see him start to disappear. Buying the white out was our first attempt at doing an exposure. If you've listened to my previous podcasts, you know how that exposure went. For those of you that haven't heard the white out story, I think it is part of the Exposure therapy podcast episode. To sum it up, it didn't go well.

I felt like our conversation about why she couldn't speak sometimes didn't go as well as I had hoped it would. It clearly scared her and I needed to find a different approach. I bought the book "My name is Eliza, and I don't talk at school" written by Lucy Nathanson and this approach of explaining what was going on was much better received. This story talks about a little girl who is able to talk to a friend at home, but when she is at the store or at school, there is a worry cloud and her voice gets stuck. It talks about how a lady name Lily came to the house and didn't ask her any questions, but started playing games with her and made her feel

comfortable enough to have her voice get unstuck. It talked about filling up a reward chart when she was doing brave work and how practicing makes it feel less scary. These were all things we were already doing. It was super relatable. Plus, it talked about how kids from all over the world had trouble speaking sometimes. It never mentions selective mutism, and honestly for the little kids, I don't think they necessarily need to know the word. Eventually we introduced the term selective mutism to our daughter and she started to understand that it was her selective mutism that was preventing her from speaking in certain situations, not the bully inside her brain.

As I've started supporting more parents and children with their SM over the years, I've tried to find an age appropriate way to tell kids about what is going on when they are unable to speak sometimes. I think it's important to educate them about the brain and what is going on within their brain, but do it in a way that they can understand and in a way that doesn't scare them, like the bully explanation. I tell them that there are lots of different parts of the brain. There is a part that keeps our heart beating, there is a part that tells us when we are tired, there is a part that tells us when we are hungry, there is a part that keeps us safe from danger, there is a part that looks for clues to let us know when we are safe, and many other parts of our brain. Sometimes, though, some parts of our brain take over and don't let some other parts work as well. For example, our Amygdala, let's call it Amy, lives deep in the middle part of our brain and she is always looking out for danger. She likes to hold a big megaphone and shout in it to make sure we can hear her. So, if we are about to cross the street and a car is coming, she'll yell "look out for the car" and have you jump to the sidewalk. Or if there is a hot pan on the stove, she'll yell "Don't touch it, it's hot" and you'll move your hand away. She is great to have and we appreciate her keeping us safe. But, sometimes she gets confused as to what is dangerous. Sometimes, when she hears someone talking to you, she thinks you are in danger, so she makes your throat feel tight to make sure you don't say anything to that person. Sometimes if a child comes over to play with you, she thinks they are going to laugh at you or are going to be mean, so she has you look away until they leave you alone. And because she has the megaphone and is yelling loudly, the other parts of your brain, like the part that looks to see if you are safe, can't hear what is going on. The part of your brain that looks for clues is the pre-frontal cortex, or Corey. Corey is a smart guy, he uses clues around you to figure out if you are safe. But, with Amy being so loud, you can't always hear what he is trying to tell you. Since you can't hear him, he lets Amy take over and he takes a nap until she's done yelling. But there are ways we can help Amy put her megaphone down so we can start listening to Corey.

I created fun little characters to show the kids and to help them not be scared about what is happening. Because, think about it, if you went to a place where everyone tells you it's going to be so fun and then you end up not being able to speak and not knowing why, you're probably going to start feeling scared. Then people are making comments about the fact that you can't speak and you can't defend yourself or tell them that you can speak, you just don't know why you can't, you're probably going to feel pretty scared and confused. Which is why I feel it's important to have a conversation with your kids about what is going on.

Now, some of you may be thinking, well I've talked to my kids about this and they just shut down or walk away and don't want to listen to what I have to say. Our kids know we are here to help fix their problems. So when we talk to them about this they may be thinking "you're going to make me talk and I can't!" So they shut down. We need to tell them that we understand that they are unable to talk sometimes and it's ok. We aren't going to make them do anything they can't do, but we are going to help support them and help them communicate in a way that makes them feel comfortable. Then as they begin to feel more and more comfortable, we'll support them on the next step. I like to play a game of "How hard would it be to..." I ask them how hard would it be to stand on two feet for 20 seconds, easy, medium, or hard. More than likely they'll say "easy." Then I ask how hard would it be to stand on one foot for 20 seconds and they may say "medium." Then I ask, how hard would it be to stand without your feet on the ground for 20 seconds. They may look at me confused or laugh and say hard! Yeah, it would be hard, actually impossible to do! I will never make you do anything that is hard, but I will help you get stronger and do the things that are medium until they become easy. Just like how it is hard to talk sometimes, I'll never make you talk when it is too hard. But we will work together and find ways for you to communicate that is easy and practice the ways that way be a medium. We'll work together to find ways to keep Amy a little quieter to allow Corey a chance to tell us if we are ok to use our voice. If our kids know we are on their side and not there to make them do something they think they can't do, it will strengthen the relationship and help build trust in working on their communication.

One of my favorite parenting books I've read is the Explosive Child by Ross Greene. This book talks about ways to bring up difficult questions about our child's behavior and have them explain what is going on – which could help for the older kids. For example, instead of telling them "Your teacher said you aren't talking in class. You need to talk to your teacher. Why are you not talking to them? You're going to fail your class." It may come across as very aggressive and they probably won't respond well to it. Try rephrasing the question and bringing it up in a more caring and compassionate way. "Hey, your teacher mentioned you aren't talking in class. Why do you think that is?" Give them time to answer. If they say "I don't know" be ok with that answer, they probably don't know! That could be your in for telling them about SM. Tell them that you were looking up some things online and came across Selective Mutism. Tell them it's an anxiety disorder that prevents people from speaking in certain situations, like school, but they can talk normally when comfortable. You could ask them if they want to learn more. If they say I don't know, you could say "that's ok if you don't know right now. Think about it and I'll ask you about it later or you can take some time to look it up on your phone later and we can chat when you're ready." This approach allows them to relax more and not be in that fight/flight/freeze stage which they are probably in frequently.

There are numerous books for all ages that can help our kids understand why they can't talk in certain situations. I have a large list on my website which is www.smhelp.org/books. I include Amazon links to the books which are part of the Amazon affiliate program. All proceeds from the affiliate program goes into a scholarship fund to help a teen with SM that is going into post-secondary school. It's one way that I can give back to these amazing and brave kids!

You know your child best. You know how they best receive information. Listen to your gut and listen to your intuition on how to talk to your child about SM. Practice what you are going to say ahead of time. Think about how you are going to react to their reaction. Think about questions they may have. Think about something you are afraid of that you have worked on overcoming. Show your kids your vulnerable side and teach them that we are all working on something. This is just their something to work on and together they will be able to overcome their selective mutism.

If you are wanting to practice with someone before talking to your child, you are welcome to schedule time with me! I offer free 30 minute coaching consultations where we could talk about what you want to say, what message you want to convey, and give you an opportunity to practice. Visit www.smhelp.org/coaching for more information. Thank you for your continued support and for listening to this podcast. I love getting feedback and hearing your takeaways from the various episodes. If you have feedback for me, you can email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com. Take care.