

Episode 5 – How Teachers can Support a Student with Selective Mutism

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. This episode is for all the amazing teachers out there working hard to enrich the lives of our children. I will explain the difference between a shy child and a child with Selective Mutism plus ways you, as a teacher, can help support a student with SM and how to help them take steps to overcome it. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 5 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. Our SM daughter started second grade this week at a brand new school. As a parent of a child with SM, the start of a new school year can be extremely stressful and emotional. It's stressful because you have to figure out the best way to communicate your child's diagnosis to a stranger that is going to be with your child for a longer period of time than you will be during the day. You never know how the teacher is going to receive the information you give them. Many of them have never heard of Selective Mutism and, unfortunately, some of them may not see it as a true disorder. They may have the mentality that the child is choosing not to speak or they just need time to warm up or that the student doesn't know how to speak or has autism. Many of us don't have a professional helping us to do the work of educating the teacher, so it comes down to the parent. I'm hoping this podcast will do the work of educating teachers so parents can enjoy the first day of school with their child stress free and worry free.

So let's start with the definition of Selective Mutism. Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder that prevents a person from speaking in certain situations. This is generally seen in young children when they start school, however, anyone at any age can be affected by Selective Mutism. Many parents may not even realize that their child is struggling in school, because they are perfectly fine at home. They have a large vocabulary, they talk freely to immediate family members, they are silly, and usually pretty smart. But, when they are at school, they may not say a single word all day. So how does this differ from a child that's shy? A shy child may be able to make eye contact and have a relaxed body position whereas a child with Selective Mutism will have an averted gaze usually down and away, their face will be tight and expressionless. A shy child may be able to nod their head or point to something, but a child with SM won't be able to nod their head, gesture, or point. Generally, if a child hasn't warmed up and started talking and interacting 4 weeks after school has started, they should be evaluated for SM or at a minimum, the parents need to be told about it. Again, the parent may have no idea that their child isn't talking at school. I can tell you from my experience, that our daughter would come home from school and tell us all about her day. She will talk to us about the kids in her class, the activities they did, where she sat at lunch, etc and we had no idea that she wasn't speaking during school because based on her recap of the day we assumed she was speaking. Again, if other parents are getting a thorough recap, they may not know that their child isn't speaking which makes it so important that a teacher lets a parent know.

Now, some of the signs I discussed such as having an averted gaze, lack of speaking, lack of gesturing, lack of expression could be the same type of signs a child with autism may present. So, how does SM differ from non-verbal autism? Well, the biggest difference with being non-verbal due to SM is that it only happens in certain situations, primarily when anxiety is high,

whereas, someone who is non-verbal due to autism they're generally non-verbal in all situations. Again, this is why it is important to contact the parents if you have a non-verbal child in your class without a diagnosis because you can ask them if their child speaks at home. If they do, the parents can send a video or audio clip of the child speaking when they are in a comfortable situation. I do want to make a note, that a child with SM can also have autism. I had an amazing opportunity to interview a mom of a child with both Autism and SM and she explained what treatment and support looks like for a child with both. If you are interested in hearing that interview, I highly suggest checking out Day 2 of the Spring 2021 Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Online Summit – I'll leave a link in the episode notes so you can check it out.

Next, I'll talk about what you can do as a teacher to help support a child with Selective Mutism. The biggest thing to remember is that SM is an anxiety disorder. They are not intentionally choosing not to speak to you. They aren't being defiant or rude. The student is in a state of fight/flight/freeze triggered by their amygdala telling their brain that they are in a dangerous situation. They, usually, tend to freeze to help protect themselves from the dangerous situation they are in. For those of us that don't have SM, it's hard to understand that simply talking to someone can be considered a dangerous situation, but for those with SM it is, and we need to be sensitive to that. The first step in supporting a student with SM, is to give them warm-up time and more importantly warm-up time with someone they are comfortable talking to such as a parent or an older sibling. That means giving the child and parent time before school starts to be in the classroom. Now, I know what you're thinking – there is no way we can have that happen due to school policy, especially now that we are in the age of Covid. But I cannot stress the importance of figuring out a way to allow this. Think about if you were afraid of water and you were told you had to go to a pool you've never been to and jump to an instructor you have never met before. You'd probably be in a fight/flight/freeze mode. You're not going to know how deep the water is, what the temperature is going to be, if the stranger is going to catch you, or if you are even going to be able to swim because you're so scared. Now think about this same scenario but having someone you trust and love there to guide you. They sit with you at the edge of the pool while you tip your toes in, then they start slowing walking with you down the steps to enter the pool, then they hold you up while you get comfortable swimming, then they guide you over to the instructor. You can see how you would start to get more and more comfortable and probably start enjoying going into the water. The same goes for supporting a child who is too anxious to speak to their teacher. If a parent is there to help guide them into conversation, the child's anxiety is going to be far less a lot quicker than if they were walking in on their own.

This type of technique is called sliding in or fading in. Here's how it works: the parent and child enter the classroom with no one else there. The child and parent are able to play a game or do a craft – something the child enjoys doing. The parent's job is to keep their child talking or at least communicating by pointing, gesturing, nodding, whispering, then building up to talking at a normal volume. Once the child is speaking comfortably, the teacher can then enter the room and busy themselves on the opposite side of the room. Again, the parent should continue to engage their child in a way so they are still speaking. The best way to keep a child speaking is to ask open ended questions, or if their anxiety is still too high to answer, they can try using Forced Choice question where the child is offered choices to answer. For example, if you are playing Legos you could ask, do you want the green or red block next, or a different color? If the child is continuing to talk, the teacher can slowly start making their way closer and closer to the parent and child. If at any point the child stops answering their parent, the teacher will need to back away until the child feels comfortable again. The end goal is to get the teacher next to the child with them still speaking and then for the parent to slowly make their way out while the

child is still speaking to the teacher. Now, this may not happen in one attempt, it may take multiple tries to have the child's anxiety lowered enough for the parent to be able to leave.

Once the parent leaves is when rapport building really needs to start happening between the teacher and the student. If the child has had some warm-up time, their anxiety level should have started to lower. The rapport building needs to be a time for the teacher to remove all expectations for the student to speak and interact with them in a positive way. During the Spring 2021 Summit I talked with two SM specialists who mentioned that teachers should make sure to take a moment to get down to the child's level and tell them that their job is not to yell at them or make them feel like they are doing things wrong, but they are there to help in any way possible and to make sure they have a fun, safe day. A child with anxiety may assume that because you are a teacher and an authoritative figure that all you're going to do is yell at them and tell them they are doing things wrong. We want to get rid of that worry for them by telling them individually and directly how you want them to do the best they can, and you are there to help when needed. There is a great acronym to help you remember the ways to build rapport which is PRIDE – Praise, Reflect, Imitate, Describe, and Enthusiasm. This is part of using CDI or Child Directed Interaction. During this time all pressure for the child to speak is taken away so their anxiety continues to lower which will hopefully increase the likelihood that they will begin to communicate. During this time you are commenting on what they are doing in a positive manner. I'll give you an example of what it would look like if you were playing blocks with a young student with SM. During the Praise phase, you could say something like "Wow, I can't believe how tall you are able to stack those blocks, it looks so cool!" Next is Reflect so an example would be "I wonder what you're going to do next. This may give them an opening to tell you what they are going to do next. If they don't say anything, that's ok, simply state what they are doing "Oh, I see you are putting a green block on top of the red block." If they do happen to speak, repeat what they say and thank them for telling you. If they say "I'm going to put the green block on the top of the red block" you would then say "You're going to put the green block on top of the red block, thanks for telling me!" Next is Imitate. You do just what the student is doing – "I'm going to put the green block on top of a red block, too!" The D in PRIDE is for Describe. This is when you simply describe what they are doing. For example you could say "I like how you are putting a strong base of blocks down first so they don't fall over as easily. Nice work." The final letter is for Enthusiasm. Have fun with the student, be silly, show them that you enjoy having them in your class. Say something like "This is so fun. I'm so glad we are able to play blocks together." I really like this form of rapport building because it seems very natural which will continue to lower their anxiety level.

Hopefully with the warm-up time and some rapport building, the child's anxiety level is low enough to start communicating. Let's break down communicating because communicating is more than just talking. Communicating can be as simple as making eye contact, nodding your head, pointing to something, making sounds like mmhmm or uh-uh, writing, whispering, and of course, talking. It's important to know how a student with SM can communicate so you can start there with them. Some therapists will start with asking open-ended questions and scale down until they get to a point where the child is able to answer. For our daughter and other's I've talked to, it seems to work well when you start easy and then gradually work up to find the point where they can't communicate. Hopefully by the momentum you've created by starting easier, it will keep them going so you can get to answer a forced choice or open ended question. If a child is unable to answer a yes or no question verbally, see if they could point to the word yes/no or a thumbs up/thumbs down icon if they aren't reading yet. Each time they answer by pointing tell them "thanks for telling me, I'm glad I know red is not your favorite color" as an example. If this is becoming easy for them, see if they could nod their head instead

of pointing. Then have them answer with mmhmm or uh-uh, then up to yes/no, then forced choice – is your favorite color green, blue, or something else? Then working all the way up to answering an open-ended question and hopefully they will begin to spontaneously speak.

Please be aware that every child is different and they are going to progress at different speeds. Some students may go straight to answering yes/no or answering forced choice questions and that's great! For others, they may need more time getting comfortable nodding their head. With that being said, we want to encourage them to continue trying to communicate in the next level. So if they are nodding their head, we want them to work up to saying mmhmm/uh-uh instead. Some kids do really well with rewards, so using a sticker chart or earning tokens to earn rewards may work. Some kids may want that feel good feeling when they do something they've never done before, so encouraging them and giving them lots of positive feedback may be what they need.

Another strategy I really like, that worked great for our daughter, was asking her questions about how hard something would be. For example, how hard would it be to answer a yes/no question from your teacher by nodding – easy, medium or hard. If she said easy, we would ask “how hard would it be to answer a yes/no question from your teacher by saying yes/no, if she indicated “hard,” we would try something in between the two – “how hard would it be to answer a yes/no question with mmhmm/uh-uh” and if she said medium that is what we would work on doing next. This method gives the student an opportunity to be in control of what they get to try which may give them more of a buy-in to push themselves to the next level.

A final strategy a teacher can try to help support a student with SM is to pair them with a child they are comfortable with. If a parent sends you a list of students that the child is comfortable with, please do what you can to get them together. I can tell you from experience, that parents put a lot of work into play dates and finding kids their child feels comfortable with and it really can make a huge difference for an SM child if they have a good friend in their class. The friend can become an intermediary for the SM student when they need to talk to the teacher. If the teacher asks the SM student a question, the SM student whispers it to the friend, and the friend tells the teacher. Over time, the SM student begins answering loud enough for the teacher to hear and the teacher can respond to the student before the friend has to repeat what was said.

I know many of my examples have been geared toward the younger kids. But, these strategies can work for older kids as well, you just may need to be a little more creative. Please remember that the teens that have SM have had SM for 10 plus years. They never got the support they needed when they needed it most for one reason or another. They have learned to get by with communicating as little as possible but still able to get their needs met. Although they may tell themselves they're fine without having to talk and they don't think they need to change, deep down I can guarantee they are wanting to let their voice out. As a teacher of a teen with SM, you need to show them compassion and care and give them the support they need to overcome this.

I feel like I could go on and on about different ways to support a child with SM, but instead of listening to me, how about listening to SM professionals that work with students day in and day out? As I mentioned before, during the Spring 2021 Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Summit I was able to interview two amazing SM specialists who talked a lot about how a teacher can support a student with SM – they were Dr. Ruth Perednik from Israel and Danielle Cottam from Australia. If you are interested in listening to these interviews, visit www.smhelp.org and go to the Awareness Merchandise Tab. As an added bonus for listening to this podcast, I am offering you

a 25% savings on Day 2 or Day 3 of the Spring Summit by entering the coupon code podcast5 all lowercase letters with the number 5 afterwards.

If you are looking for more ways to help support a student in your class that has SM, there is a whole page dedicated to teachers on the SM H.E.L.P. website. You can also email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com or send me a message on Facebook or Instagram. The next episode will be released in two weeks and it will be geared towards parents and how they can support their child as they get ready for a new school year. Take care!

Go to <https://www.smhelp.org/awareness-merchandise.html> for more information about the Spring 2021 Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Online Summit.

For more teacher resources, visit <https://www.smhelp.org/teachertherapist-resources.html>