

How Parents can Support their SM Child in School

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 talking about ways to support your SM child as they start back to school for a new school year. I will share strategies that worked for us to help our daughter get comfortable at school and how we continue to support her throughout the year. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 6 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. For many kids the start of a new school year brings a lot of excitement – new teacher, new friends, new clothes, and new school supplies. For a child with SM it can be downright dreadful – new teacher, new friends, new clothes, and new school supplies. As a parent it is a very stressful time not knowing what the new school year is going to bring, especially for those starting school for the first time, starting at a new school, or starting back with in-person learning instead of distance learning. There are so many questions that are on our minds – will the teacher be the right fit? Will my child get bullied? Will anyone befriend my child even if they don't talk? Will they eat their lunch? Will they be able to ask to go to the bathroom? What happens if they get hurt, will they tell someone? The list goes on and on and it can become very overwhelming. When parents get overwhelmed, we may become anxious, when we become anxious, our kids pick up on that and their anxiety goes up even more. So, let's take a deep breath together...and let's get to work helping our kids.

I think the first step in starting any new school year is letting the teacher know about your child's diagnosis. If you aren't able to find out who your child's teacher is before school starts, let the principal know about your child and ask them to share the information with whoever your child's teacher is going to be. To help educate your child's teacher, you can share my last episode, Episode 5, which has information specifically for teachers about students with Selective Mutism. You can also create an "About Me" handout that has information about Selective Mutism and how it pertains to your child. To help you out, I've put information in the episode notes on how you can get a template to use. Another way for your child to get to know their teacher is to ask if they can send your child a video talking about themselves – where they are from, their likes and dislikes, if they have any kids or pets, what they like to do in their free time. And, depending on your child's level of SM, they may be able to send a video back or maybe write back some things about themselves. It will give your child and teacher a way to start building rapport before even stepping foot in the classroom.

The next step should be getting a schedule of the daily routine and if changes from day to day. Kids with anxiety seem to do so much better with having a routine and knowing what it will be can take away some of the anxiety they are feeling. When you get the schedule, run through it with them a few times at home so they can start picturing how the day will go. If your child is going to a new school, ask if you can take pictures of the classroom and the hallways. Take videos of routes to take to get to certain places. Again, this will give your child time to start processing where things are and how to get to certain places to hopefully start lowering their anxiety. Plus, if they are able to speak to you when looking at the pictures and picturing themselves in that room, maybe it will make them more comfortable when they are actually in the room as they will remember talking while looking at the pictures with you – just a thought.

Another great way to get your child ready for a new school year is to ask the teacher if you can take time in the classroom prior to the start of the new school year. I know this can be very difficult especially during these Covid times, but it can really make a huge difference. Prior to a new school year when our daughter's SM was at its worse, we would go to the school weekly. We would eat lunch in the cafeteria, read books in the library, play in the gym and on the playground, and play games in her classroom. Once her teacher came back to the school to get the room ready for the new year, our daughter would come and help the teacher do a project in the room. Again, this is time for rapport building which is so important in reducing the child's anxiety level. When parents are in the school, it's important to keep your child talking. Ask them forced choice or open ended questions or maybe have them read a poster out loud to you or describe the poster if they aren't reading yet. Be silly with them and tell them stories about how much you enjoyed school – or maybe how scared you were starting a new school year and how you were able to overcome being scared.

Alright, now that we've talked about a few tips on getting them prepared for the new school year, let's talk about the first day of school. I feel the most important tip is to make sure they get a good night's rest. I'm going to share a parenting hack we've done a few times this year already for our elementary aged kids which is turn your clocks an hour ahead. We have a pretty strict bedtime routine – again this helps with keeping anxiety levels low as our kids can predict how the day is going to go. Our kids know that at a certain time we need to get ready for bed whether it's light out or not. So as they are busy playing, we will go around and change all the clocks an hour ahead. This means an earlier dinner, so make sure you are prepared for that! Before bed have them set out the clothes they want to wear and what they want to eat for breakfast. Have them pack their school bag and set out their shoes. If you want to get really detailed, you can create a list with them of what needs to be done in the morning – get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, put shoes on, etc – that way they can check off what they did and they know what still needs to get done. Take time with them at bedtime to just lay with them. Tell your child how much you love them and tell them how much you look forward to hearing about their day. You could even give them a mini scavenger hunt to do – let me know how many boys vs girls are in your class, tell me what color shirt your teacher is wearing, let me know if anyone wears glasses in your class – whatever fun things you want to come up with. It will give them something to focus on and give you something to talk about when they get home.

Our daughter was, and still is, very reward motivated. This helped us to create brave challenges for her to do at school. The biggest thing to remember when creating a challenge is to know where your child is in overcoming their SM. If they have trouble simply making eye contact, you don't want their challenge to be answering an open-ended question. If they are answering with a verbal yes/no, don't challenge them to nod their head yes or no. You need to find something that is just a little bit more challenging than how they are currently communicating.

So how do you know what challenges to start with? Well, go through the list of questions you had constantly weighing on your mind and find the ones that are the biggest priorities. If making sure they are asking to go to the bathroom is a high priority, set a goal for that and reward them when they are able to do it. Now, that doesn't mean the first day of school they have to go up to their teacher and ask if they can use the restroom, you help your child find a way to communicate their needs based on where they are at. For example, our daughter could not speak to her teachers, but she could hand them things. I don't know if you remember Pogs,

but I happened to still have my Pog Slammer which was basically a big, heavy coin with a fancy design on it. We nicknamed this her “Potty Coin.” I let the teachers know ahead of time that she had this coin and when she needed to use the restroom, all she had to do was show the teacher her coin. It was her way of communicating her needs without creating a lot of anxiety. If they she was able to use the coin to communicate, she got rewarded for that. Another example would be if you want them to eat all of their lunch, maybe have them help make their lunch so they know exactly what is in it. You could even number each item and have them eat it in that order. Then, if they eat half of their lunch, they get a certain reward, if they eat all of their lunch they get a bigger reward. Work with your child on what motivates them and find something that they want to work toward. Again, we were lucky in that our child loved rewards. We used ice cream as a lower value reward and we would use staying up late on Fridays as a bigger reward for the hard stuff. You could use screen time as a reward, going to the library and picking out new books, going to the dollar store and picking out something new, having breakfast for dinner, find a new park and play – get creative and have fun with it.

Another way for an SM child to become motivated to start talking to others is to create an “I Can Talk to” list and a “I Want to Talk to” list. This was extremely helpful for our daughter and I think it could be helpful at any age. In the “I Can Talk to” list she would write down who she could talk to. At the time we started the list it was 4 people – Mom, Dad, Brother, and Grandma. On the other side, she would write down people she wanted to talk to. For her, she wanted to talk to certain friends. This also helped give me an indication of whose parents I should try and reach out to for play dates. We would create challenges based off the list of people she wanted to talk to. We had what we called “Brave Tickets” which were raffle tickets from the Dollar store. For anyone she talked to that was on the “I Want to Talk to” side, she would get two Brave Tickets. For anyone she talked to on the “I Can Talk to” side in front of other people, she would get one Brave Ticket. When she got home from school, she would tell me who she talked to and we would give out the appropriate number of tickets. Once she talked to someone on the “I Want to Talk to” side, we would cross them off and move them to the “I Can Talk to” side. She could start to visually see the “I Can Talk to” side fill up. Plus, if she talked to someone on the “I Can Talk to” side again, we would put a star next to their name. Not only could she start seeing the list of names accrue, but also see a line of stars adding up as she kept talking to that person.

Like I mentioned, the list is a good way to figure out who your child wants to talk to and therefore you could try to set up play dates at your house with that child. I know from experience how uncomfortable it can feel to reach out to a total stranger and ask if their child would like to play with your child. But, believe me, it is such a great way to start transferring speech from home to school. If the parent agrees to a play date, see if they would be willing to drop their child off for an hour to play. Your job as the parent is to help your child begin to communicate vocally when their friend is there. Again, start where they are at – if they are comfortable nodding to yes/no questions, start there, then work up to them answering mmhmm/uh-uh, then yes/no, then forced choice, and finally to open ended questions. The goal is to have your child’s anxiety low enough to start talking to you in front of their friend and then for them to start talking to their friend. By doing this, your child will have a better chance of talking to their friend in school. The friend could become an intermediary when your child talks to their teacher. For example, the teacher asks your child a question, your child tells their friend, the friend tells the teacher. Overtime, the child becomes more comfortable speaking in front of others and may not need the friend to repeat what was said. Make sure the teacher is aware of any friends your child has so they can pair them up as much as possible. In addition, it

can help you determine who they may want to start playing with at recess and who to sit by at lunch.

Another thing I learned over the years that should have been obvious to me but wasn't, is that I needed to actually talk with my daughter about what she was going through and how hard it would be to do certain things. Things that may seem super easy for me could be extremely difficult for our daughter. She may not even know what is possible if I don't ask her if she could do it. Our SM kids can get stuck in a state of not communicating because they don't like the feeling they get when they get anxious. Their heart may start to be faster, their tummy might start to hurt, their throat might feel tight. Since talking makes them feel anxious, they avoid it to avoid those unwanted feelings. As their parents, we need to help guide them towards communicating and by talking with them about how hard something would be, may give them a starting point. As an example, let's say the teacher is teaching the class about colors – side note, many of my examples are for young kids since that was the age my daughter was when we were in the thick of it. Stick with me to the end and I have a special announcement for those of you with teens. You could ask your child how hard would it be to answer the teacher's question about colors out loud – easy, medium, or hard? We used hand gestures to help with this. If it was hard, our daughter's hands would be very far apart, if easy she would clap her hands together, and if it was medium, her hands would be somewhere between the other two distances. The goal is to find something that is considered "medium." If they indicated hard for answering out loud to the teacher's question, you could ask how hard would it be to hold up fingers to indicate the color. If they indicate medium, that would be where to start. The teacher could ask the class "What color is the Sun, hold up one finger for yellow and two fingers for red." The whole class could participate in this manner giving more confidence to the SM child since they would be answering as a group. The next step could be "how hard would it be to hold up a finger to answer a question if the teacher asks you a question in front of the class?" Again, if they answer medium, that is what you need to work on and reward for doing. If they answer easy, agree with them that you think they could do it too and come up with something a little more difficult – "how hard would it be to tell your friend the answer when the teacher asks you a question?" All of these little conversations let your child know that you are there to support them and you're not going to make them try something that is too hard for them. It builds confidence in themselves, trust in you, and motivation for them to make you proud and for them to earn a reward along the way.

Another part of our child's anxiety that we all need to be aware of is the afterschool meltdown. This is the time of day where us parents really need to be on our A game, even though they are going to push us down a parenting path we told ourselves we'd never go down. Once you start understanding where the meltdown is coming from, it may give you an opportunity to be prepared for it and, hopefully, prevent it from getting out of hand. Our kids are in a state of anxiety pretty much all day. They can't talk to anyone and they don't understand why, they may have stomachaches or headaches, they may be overwhelmed from all the noise and lights, so when they get home, they need a way to unleash all of that pent up frustration they felt all day. And who do our kids feel the most comfortable with unleashing their inner beast? Us parents, so we get the brunt of it. They may scream at us, not listen, not want to do any homework, and they may be so hungry it turns them into a hangry monster. So what can you do? The first thing I have ready is a smile on my face and a snack. I can then get a feel for what they are going to need next – is it going to be a time where they zone out in front of the tv or play a video game, do we need to take a walk or bike ride around the block, do they need to jump on the trampoline, or do some coloring or other fine motor activity? Or, if things are really

out of control, do we need to sit down and create a schedule of what the afterschool routine is going to be? They may want to do all of the activities mentioned above, but not have enough time to do it all. Creating a schedule will let them know exactly what they will be doing and for how long. No matter what you decide to do, please do what you can to not spiral with them. I can admit that I have become angry at our daughter's meltdowns and yelled when I shouldn't have, but I'm human, and so are you. It happens, but we need to do what we can so it doesn't become a routine. That's what happened to us at one point, we had a routine of being angry with one another which was not helpful for anyone. Creating a routine that involves yoga, meditation, or deep breathing may be effective for your child. Our daughter gets more worked up with those activities, so it never worked for us, but it doesn't hurt to try.

Once your child is in a calm state of mind, that is when you could start asking them about their day. You could start with those scavenger hunt questions – what color shirt was your teacher wearing today? Was anyone absent? Did you notice how many kids wear glasses? If they are forth coming with answering those types of questions, you could talk about the goals you are set up. Were you able to use your potty coin today? Did you play with your friend on the playground? Can we add anyone to your "I Can Talk to" list? There is a fine line of getting the answers you want without pushing them too hard or making them feel like they didn't do enough. Keep supporting them. Adjust the goal if something ended up being too hard. We want them to feel like they accomplished something they didn't think they could do so they get that feel good feeling inside. Rewards are temporary. Feeling good about yourself after you doing something difficult, that's what's going to get our kids to the next level.

My final point I want to talk about, which I wish someone had told me at the beginning, is don't forget to have fun with your child. Try not to focus solely on their SM and finding ways for them to try to overcome it. Be silly with them, have crazy dance parties, build forts, do the fun stuff to help you remember that SM is just small part of who they are, it does not define them.

Now for the special announcement I have for those of you with teens. My next free online summit is going to be all about information for teens and adults with SM. I have some amazing professionals that have great advice and tips for parents who have teenagers in the thick of SM. Teens and adults think and act differently than the preschool and elementary aged kids. Many of the SM resources out there don't specifically address how teens and adults can overcome their SM. I hope you join me for this Free Summit happening October 22nd-October 25th. You can visit www.smhelp.org for more information.

Good luck this school year, if you have any questions or want to share in any triumphs, don't hesitate to reach out. You can email me at smhelp2020@gmail.com or find me on Facebook or Instagram by searching Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Take care!

For access to the editable "About Me" template go to <https://www.smhelp.org/parent-resources.html> and scroll all the way to the bottom. Or, you can have a template sent to you be emailing smhelp2020@gmail.com and using the Subject Line "Template."

To learn more about the Free Selective Mutism H.E.L.P. Online Summit and to register, visit <https://www.smhelp.org/free-summit.html> This Free Summit will be October 22nd-25th, 2021 and be all about information to help Teens and Adults with SM.