

## Episode 7 – How to Guide an SM Child Towards Speaking

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 strategies to help a child with Selective Mutism start talking. I will discuss how building rapport is key to helping an SM child and how understanding the difference between speaking and communicating can guide someone with SM towards the final goal of talking. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode 7 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 some of you with kids that started therapy, the therapist may have jumped right into trying to get the child to speak. They may spend months or years trying different techniques to get the child to speak when they may have missed the very first important component. I feel that as a therapist, as a relative, or as a teacher helping someone with SM, the most important first step is to build rapport with the person with SM. You have to remember that Selective Mutism is an anxiety disorder. If someone has anxiety, they're going to have a harder time speaking in those situations or to that person where anxiety is high. If you build rapport with them their anxiety should hopefully be lowered which will increase the likelihood of them speaking.

I've used the analogy of someone being afraid of dogs before. If someone is afraid of dogs you're not going to throw them into the dog park. You'll start slow. You'll lower their anxiety by showing them pictures of dogs, by having them listen to dogs barking, by maybe looking at dogs being walked outside a rescue, then going into the rescue to see the dogs closer, then to going into the same room as a dog. Each step is lowering their anxiety and giving them more confidence in their ability to be around dogs. The same goes for someone that is afraid to speak due to their heightened anxiety level. If the therapist says to a child with SM I can't help you if you don't talk to me that's going to put way too much pressure on that child which will increase their anxiety and make it that much more difficult to talk to that person.

So where do you start? Start by building rapport. Building rapport doesn't mean asking a child what their favorite color is, how many brothers and sisters they have, what their favorite hobby is. Building rapport is getting to know the child in a way that's comfortable for them. And what's the best way for a child to get comfortable? Through play. Find out from their parents what they like to play with, what their favorite game is, do they like to color, do they like to go on the playground, what is it that really gets them excited? If a child has a lot of difficulty being around strangers, rapport building may have to start with the parents in the room. Have the parents start playing the child's favorite game before the therapist, the teacher, or Grandma comes into the room with them. This favorite game is going to help lower their anxiety level and give them a better opportunity to use their voice to their parents with the other person in the room. If you are the person that you want the child to speak to your job would be to just comment on the game - Oh I loved the game Guess Who when I was a kid. That was a great question asking if they had blue eyes. Wow, I can't believe you guessed the right person, you are really good at this game! Imagine how that kid is going to feel inside when they get praised

for doing something they're having fun doing. It's so much different than a person coming in and saying which person do you think your mom has? They're going to look at you like you have four heads, if they even look at you at all. They're probably thinking to themselves who is this person, why do they want to know which person is on my mom's card, and what is going to be their reaction if I speak?

If you're the person that the child is trying to speak to, you need to be believable. I feel that kids with anxiety have a better way of reading people's body language and what their true personality is. There have been many times when our daughter will be with people that are trying to help her get to that next level of speaking and something about their personality just rubs her the wrong way and she may never be able to speak to them. At the same time there could be somebody else doing the exact same things but something about their personality makes it easier for our daughter to speak to them. We often joked that when our daughter did speak to another parent or relative or teacher we would say that they were part of the chosen few and that our daughter can see a special something inside of them.

Another way to build rapport may be to try and limit the amount of demands you're placing on the child right away. I'm sure teachers listening ask students to do a lot of tasks once they get to school. Come on in, put your backpack away, put your folder in the bin, go pick what you're having for lunch, go sit down - there's a lot of things that may be thrown at a child right away that might be too much for them and their anxiety takes over. Maybe giving them just one task in the morning - "Good morning, go ahead and hang your backpack up" and then walk them to their seat. Then maybe later they could put the folder in the bin. Then a little while later they could let you know by pointing if they're having hot lunch or cold lunch. Try not to bombard them with demand after demand after demand even if you're doing your best to be positive and fun, it may be too much too soon.

One strategy that I mentioned in my last episode was having the parents create an about me handout for the teachers and other staff at the school. This will give the parents an opportunity to write down things that the child enjoys - if they enjoy certain board games, reading certain books, watching certain TV shows or movies, what their favorite color is, their favorite type of animal, and whatever else the child is into. That will give the teachers a starting point on topics to talk about to build rapport. Again, this isn't for a teacher to look at the paper and ask the child "What's your favorite movie?" You have to find a round about way to get that information. For example a teacher could comment on the child's shirt and say something like "I really like your Princess shirt you're wearing today. I wonder which Princess is your favorite. My favorite is Cinderella because I love her blue dress." Even if the child loves Cinderella and her favorite color is blue she still may too anxious to agree. But the feeling that she gets inside, that little sparkle of joy and excitement she felt knowing her teacher likes the same princess as she does, that's going to push away the icky anxiety feeling. And what happens when anxiety is lowered? The child may be at a point where they can start communicating.

That brings me to my next topic. Communicating is more than speaking. It took me awhile to realize that, but once I did, I had a better understanding of where my daughter was at. There are so many ways to communicate your wants and needs without having to speak. In order for our kids to feel comfortable speaking they need to feel comfortable communicating first. Many

of the SM specialists will say that the expectation to talk needs to be removed, which may seem backwards. How will a child with SM speak if we don't expect them to? The most basic way to start communicating is by making eye contact. If you make eye contact with someone, you know they see you and are paying attention to you. If a child with SM can make eye contact with you, great! Step one complete! However, if a child can't make eye contact, like our daughter couldn't, that is where you need to start. Like I've mentioned before, for our daughter a reward system worked really well. When we started working with our SM therapist she would give our daughter a little token anytime she made eye contact with her. A therapist or teacher could also say things like "Great job looking at me, you have such pretty blue eyes." Now this may not work for every child, so it's important for parents to understand how their child is motivated so that the person working with their child knows how to keep the momentum going. The next step we worked on after our daughter started being able to make eye contact with people was to point to things. When she was in preschool she had a hard time communicating how she was feeling. When she arrived to school she would go to a feelings chart and point to how she was feeling. If she was feeling happy, she would point to happy. If she was feeling hungry, she would point to hungry. If she was feeling tired she pointed to tired. This gave her an opportunity to communicate how she was feeling without having to say how she was feeling.

Our next communication step was using fingers to communicate. Going off of the previous example, instead of our daughter pointing to how she was feeling, teachers would ask her to hold up 1 finger if she was feeling happy, 2 fingers if she was feeling sad, and 3 fingers if she was feeling something different. This step was a little more advanced than simply pointing and it was an achievable goal for her. Then we worked up to nodding her head in response to being asked a yes/no question. Again, our daughter had a very severe case of SM, so it was important for us to start easy and work our way up. If we would have started with open ended questions and worked our way down until she was able to communicate, she would have lost confidence in herself and I think it would have taken her a lot longer to get to a point of communicating her wants and needs.

After she mastered nodding her head to a yes/no question on a consistent basis, we encouraged her to say mmhmm/uh-uh in response to a yes/no question. This simple noise would be the first noise her teachers or peers would hear. It was so important for her teachers to stay neutral to her response and not be overjoyed with her doing it. A simple "thanks for letting me know" is all she needed to indicate that she did a good job. Another technique some SM specialists will use is to have them make the sound "sss" for yes or "nnn" for no. It is a way for them to start making sounds to eventually form words. Unfortunately, this strategy did not work for our daughter. She is a very black and white thinker so to her it didn't make sense to say "sss" when she needed to indicate yes to something. That is why we used mmhmm/uh-uh, it made more sense to her so she had more buy-in when trying to use her voice.

From there we moved up to answering yes/no. If a teacher is needing to find out which letters the young student knows, instead of asking which letter is this, which is an open-ended question, they could ask is this the letter T, yes or no? When the child answers verbally, respond with a neutral tone, "That's right, thanks for telling me." Our teacher would have a little reward chart as they did exercises like this. The natural response for our daughter was to

answer by nodding her head because it was the easiest and didn't cause her to feel anxious, but the teacher had to explain that if she answered with a yes or no, she would get a sticker on her reward chart. If she filled the chart she would get to pick something from the treasure chest. This helped motivate our daughter to actually say yes or no and she could visually see how many times she was able to do it. We found that the biggest reason our daughter didn't want to use her voice, was because she didn't know what would happen afterwards. Once she realized nothing bizarre happened to her after she spoke, she gained more confidence in using her voice.

The step after verbally answering yes or no was answering a forced choice question. This was a question that had answer choices within the question. For example, Is this the letter T or L? Again, when they answer, thank them for telling you in a neutral tone. "That's right, thanks for telling me." Another tip the SM specialists recommend is to give the child up to 5 seconds to answer. Sometimes their processing speed is slowed due to the anxiety, so they may need just a little bit more time to answer. You can help lower their anxiety by not looking directly at them while they are thinking of the answer. If you are pointing to a letter, just keep looking at the letter until they answer.

After the child is getting really good at answering the forced choice questions, it's time to move up to open-ended questions. This means the child is not given the answer within the question, they have to come up with it on their own. This is another time where giving them 5 seconds to answer may help. Which letter is this? Hopefully by this point they have found that when they answered in the past, nothing "bad" happened to them. Their anxiety has been lowered each time which will give them a better opportunity to respond verbally.

Depending on the child, these different stages may take time to get to the point of them answering open-ended questions. Or, they may be able to get to open-ended questions in one day. Understanding how high their anxiety is, what motivates them, and knowing to quit while you're ahead, can all help move them up the communication ladder quicker.

Many of my above examples were for teachers in the school setting. But, there is a lot that parents can do outside of school to give the child a better opportunity to speak within school. During the younger years, children are usually required to read to the teacher. Our daughter began reading very early, but wasn't able to read to the teacher so they didn't know where her reading level was at. I started working with her reading out loud by using the book "Go Dog Go." There are many of the same words over and over in this book. We started at home by her reading all the "Go" words. I would read everything, but when I got to "Go," she would read it out loud and I would make a mark on a reward chart. We would read the whole book in this manner. We would then go to the local library and do the same thing, then go to her school, and to the park. When she was confident with that, she would read all the "Dog" words in addition to "Go." Then she would read all colors and eventually she got to reading the entire book out loud in various places. I'm not going to lie, this was super time consuming, but it was so worth it.

During the summer before Kindergarten we started working with our daughter on recording herself reading. We wanted to have this be an option in case we needed to send a recording to

her teacher to evaluate her reading level. When we first started, she would not record herself with us present, she would have to be alone in her room. Here is a her first recording we did in July of 2019 – hopefully you’ll be able to hear it. I’m going to skip ahead as it took her 50 seconds to finally start reading.

We had her practice on a somewhat regular basis and each time it got easier. This recording is from August. After only a month, she was reading louder and clearer.

Eventually she got to a point of her being able to record herself reading with one of us in the room with her. This is a recording from October where her dad and her were taking turns reading different pages. She was really able to let her silly personality shine. Again, this takes time. It can be an extremely slow process, but if you rush it, the results of speaking may take even longer or the child may give up. It really is hard for me to believe that these recordings were taken only two years ago. Our daughter is a typical child at school now. No one would know that she once was a girl that couldn’t speak.

I know my examples explain strategies to use with young children since this was the age when we were knee deep in our daughter’s SM. But don’t forget, October 22<sup>nd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> I will be hosting a Free Online Summit specifically geared towards information for teens and adults with SM. You can register by going to [www.smhelp.org](http://www.smhelp.org). My intention is to keep the Summits and this Podcast as a free SM resource. But, as you could imagine, there are costs associated with each of them. If you are willing to contribute to some of the operation costs, I have a link below. If you contribute \$10 you’ll get one free awareness bracelet and if you contribute \$20 you will receive two free awareness bracelets. Your generosity is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions about SM or are looking to brainstorm ideas on how to get your child to the next level of communication, feel free to email me at [smhelp2020@gmail.com](mailto:smhelp2020@gmail.com) or reach out to me via Facebook or Instagram. Take care!

Link for the “About Me” downloadable template <https://www.smhelp.org/parent-resources.html> (scroll to the bottom of the page)

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