



## **“Handover/Takeover (HO/TO)”**

For the child or teen with Selective Mutism

*Stimulating social engagement: The precursor to social communication!*

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The Key to becoming a *confident social communicator* is acquiring and securing social engagement. “Social engagement” is acknowledging, interacting, and reacting to another person. Surprisingly, many individuals who suffer from Selective Mutism (SM) lack simple engagement skills. In relation to the Social Communication Bridge® these individuals are noncommunicative or minimally communicative with others.

For *most* children and teens with SM, the lack of social engagement skills is not due to lack of ability. Instead, this is due to initial feelings of anxiety or fear and resultant avoidant behaviors. Typically, a lack of opportunities and conditioned and enabled behaviors exist.

The child’s difficulty with social engagement often starts from birth. Most children with SM have an innately timid temperament. Some may have difficulty with processing sensory stimuli, an expressive language difficulty, limited exposure to social encounters, or may be bilingual. Some children have a combination of many reasons for feeling anxious and fearful in social situations. Therefore, although the etiology of this “fear” may differ among children with SM, the children react similarly from a neurobiological standpoint.

The physiological mechanism of “fear” causes the child to freeze. The child therefore “shuts down” and immobilization occurs. Defensive behaviors develop. Muscle stiffness occurs, causing the child to look visibly uncomfortable, manifest a flat affect, avert gaze, and develop mute behavior. The child’s neurological system perceives the social environment where he/she senses an expectation for speech as unsafe or threatening; hence the term Neuroception, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges from University of Illinois; Chicago. The child’s resultant defensive behavior causes him/her to disengage from social interaction and communication.

Some parents misunderstand the child’s avoidance and try very hard to get the child to interact and talk. This only causes the child to feel more anxious and avoidant because *the expectation is far greater than what the child can comfortably accomplish*. Anxiety heightens. Then, parents learn that their child may have an anxiety disorder and manifest the “Oh my gosh” phenomenon. Parents take an opposite approach. They now overtly protect the child to minimize fear. Parents will “buffer” the child by holding him/her close, do the speaking and interacting for the child, etc. As a result, social interaction, simple engagement opportunities, and expectations are minimized.

As the child ages, the underlying reasons for his/her anxious feelings may become minimized or perhaps disappear. However, “parental protection behavior” or “social buffering” may continue. This reinforces the child’s social engagement avoidance. In other words, the social communication pathway (system) becomes dusty and develops cobwebs from underuse! The longer the system is not used, the more sensitive the system becomes! Even mild expectations can elicit fear and avoidant behaviors.



Parents then protect even more...and a viscous cycle occurs. This may lead to a lack of social engagement and conditioned noncommunicative or minimally communicative behaviors. Unfortunately, many try to get a child to verbalize when the child is not even engaging. It is no wonder why a child with SM may develop even more fear and reinforced avoidance due to unrealistic expectations.

Social engagement activities and strategies were developed as part of Social Communication Anxiety Treatment (S-CAT) ® for individuals who need to build engagement skills as a prerequisite to nonverbal and eventually verbal communication. In order for “engagement strategies” to be effective, parents need to unlearn their conditioned “*social buffering*.”

*Ways parents can unlearn social buffering:*

- Encourage the child to be on the “Front Line” of an interaction.
  - Rather than shadowing their parent, the child should be next to or in front of the parent.  
*\*Ideally, the smaller, quieter and less crowded the environment, the easier for the child.*
- Think: “*Band-aid over mouth and hands in pockets*”
  - This mantra helps parents step aside to encourage their child’s involvement.
- *Expose, Expose and Expose!*
  - The more social opportunities, the better!

As parents do the above, encourage the child to hand items to others and take items from others. Hence, Handover/Takeover (HOTO). For younger children, we may encourage the Handover/Takeover Game. A creative approach is: Mrs. Handover or Mrs. Takeover or Mr. Handover or Mr. Takeover. For older children/teens, a more active approach or the Goal of Handover/Takeover (HO/TO) is recommended.

A positive reinforcement chart to keep track of HO/TO efforts often helps with unlearning behavior. Therefore, the way to help the child develop the necessary stage of social engagement is to begin encouraging interaction in a gentle and approachable fashion. Handover/Takeover (HO/TO) is an ideal strategy for this.

Implementation of engagement strategies can help parents unlearn conditioned “social buffering.” Also, these strategies desensitize the child to more comfortable interaction, which fuels the progression into confident nonverbal and eventually verbal communication!

Reference: Stephen W. Porges. Univ. of Illinois at Chicago. NEUROCEPTION: *A Subconscious System for Detecting Threats and Safety.*

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