



Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center

By: Dr. Elisa Shipon-Blum

President and Director Selective Mutism Anxiety Research and Treatment Center (SMart-Center)

Founder & Director Emeritus The Selective Mutism Group Childhood Anxiety Network (SMG~ CAN)

Clinical Assistant Professor Family Medicine and Psychology PCOM

www.selectivemutismcenter.org ~ smartcenter@selectivemutism.org ~ 215-887-5748

PREPARING THE CHILD WITH SELECTIVE MUTISM FOR THE UPCOMING SCHOOL YEAR!

ADVICE:

Contact your child's school:

Ø **Educate staff to SM and be sure that they UNDERSTAND Selective Mutism and HOW it relates to YOUR child.** NOT all children with SM are the same, therefore their experience with others with SM does not imply they will KNOW how to accommodate and plan interventions that for YOUR child.

Since the majority of school personnel do NOT understand SM, you will need to be your child's best advocate. Consider books and CD's where YOU or a school personnel will lead an educational session for teachers involved with your child. Consider webinars or encouraging the school to send a staff member or members to an upcoming SM conference.

Ø **Be sure to be involved in the choice of teachers for your child.** Children with SM benefit from a nurturing, gentle, calm and understanding teacher who is willing to go the 'extra-step' for your child. Having a structured class where routines are predictable is best.

Ø **Schedule a meeting with relevant school personnel about necessary 'accommodations' and interventions that need to be in place for your child.** This can be in the form of general accommodations/interventions or more formalized such as a 504 or Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). The choice of which 'plan' to choose depends on your child's degree of social, emotional and educational functioning with the school settings. YOUR outside treatment professional should help guide you to which PLAN is best for YOUR child.

Accommodations and interventions chosen are based on your child's level of social comfort and baseline level of communication with peers, classroom and extended teachers.

Understanding the **Social Communication BRIDGE** © philosophy where the different stages of social communication are explained in a visual format, and then explaining that anxiety changes from setting to setting and person to person will help the school personnel better 'understand' SM.

- **Preparing the spring PRIOR to the next school year will allow for time to discuss and organize a well thought-out educational plan and to determine if your child needs an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) Or a 504 plan.**

Please note that if your child has an official diagnosis of Selective Mutism, he/she meets the criteria for a disability since SM affects the major life activity of SPEAKING. Therefore EVERY child 'qualifies' for a 504 plan. This does not mean that every child NEEDS to have a 504 plan, but if the school is not accommodating your child and implementing strategies/interventions to help your child build social comfort to progress communicatively, an official plan will be necessary. MOST children with SM do not just begin speaking. Even when ANXIETY is low, they need HELP via accommodations and interventions to BRIDGE into VERBAL Communication.

With the help of school staff, determine:

- Ø Who your child's teacher will be (as above)
- Ø Name of some children who will be in your child's class (to arrange for summer get-togethers!)
- Ø The location of your child's classroom

Many schools are reluctant to give out the above information since schedules and class lists are often incomplete until later in the summer.

You may not be able to determine the information before a few weeks prior to the opening of school; however by making an appointment with the principal, and/or other relevant school personnel, to explain the importance of knowing the above (i.e. "Information will help your child adjust easier by feeling more comfortable PRIOR to the start of school... YOUR child can have play dates with school mates, can spend time in the classroom prior to school starting, meet and spend time with his/her teacher") there is a chance they you will receive some information that can help.

If your school is adamant about NOT sharing names, you should have a guarantee (written within any accommodation plan!) that your child:
--Will be placed with at least a few children he/she is the MOST comfortable with
--Will have the opportunity to MEET his/her teacher PRIOR to the beginning of school
--Will have access to the classroom prior to school (late summer while the teacher is setting up the room!)

Since SOCIAL COMFORT precedes communication, every effort to help your child become comfortable with at least a few peers and ONE ON ONE with the classroom teacher is suggested!

Things to do to help build peer relationships and social comfort:

Ø **Call parents of children whom your child will be in school with.**
For families who have children beginning a new school (such as the start of preschool or Kindergarten), a hint to HOW to find out the names of children who will be in your child's grade are to approach teachers one or two years ahead of your child. Chances are they have a child in their class who has a SIBLING beginning school... (For families with multiple children, the average age span is 2-3 years apart). Therefore, approaching now 1st and 2nd grade teachers about which children in their class have siblings starting school next year, gives you the opportunity to approach the parents of these children and suggest a play date to

help the children become comfortable prior to the start of the year. MOST parents will love this opportunity! They too want their child comfortable! Encourage the child to come to your home, or to meet at a park.

In the beginning, just exposing your child to a future classmate is all that needs to be done.

Within a few short play dates, your child will most likely be interacting with the other child more comfortably. Parents may need to 'start off' play dates by engaging the children in various activities, e.g., baking, games, computer play, art projects, etc. **There should be NO expectations. REWARD your child for a job well done after the play date and let him/her know how proud you are of how they interacted...even if it was all NONVERBAL.**

Ø **Start out with your child meeting ONE NEW CHILD AT A TIME.**

Do not overwhelm your child with meeting many new kids at a time. Work on one new child at a time. Once comfort is established, introduce another child...hopefully; before summer is out, your child will have met quite a few children who will be in their class!! Having a few peers over at a time is fine as long as he/she has met with each one individually.

Ø **Spend time on the school grounds, such as the fields/playground throughout the summer!** Practice makes perfect! As most of us know, recess and gym are often tough for many of our SM kids. Practicing sports and skills on the school grounds is an excellent way to build confidence and self-esteem—and lowered anxiety

Ø **Walk throughout the school building as much as possible.**

Some schools are open throughout the summer. So start ASAP. For other schools that are closed, begin 'walking the halls' and spending time in the classroom and rooms where your child will be as soon as the school reopens prior to school. While in the school, TALK to your child and encourage verbalization by asking him/her questions. **DO not TELL your child that they need to speak.** Just talk to him/her while in the school. Since others are not around, your child will most likely begin speaking to you very soon. GOAL: For child to see himself/herself as a verbal communicator in the school environment!

Ø **Perhaps bring one, two and eventually three of your child's classmates into the school environment.** What a perfect place to have a play date. Chances are, the other parent will appreciate that you are helping their child feel more comfortable too.

Ø **When you spend time in the classroom, talk to your child about all of the fun things they are going to be doing.** Again, encourage verbalization as much as possible by asking direct, choice and yes/no questions.

Ø **Many of our SM children/teens have eating and bathroom issues.**

Spending time working on this during the summer will help your child when the year begins. Suggestions are to spend time WITHIN the school practicing 'using the toilet' and 'eating.' Most schools are open a few weeks prior to the start of the school year. Arrange with staff (perhaps add to your IEP or 504 plan) that you will be in/out of the school during the days to help your child adjust to the setting and to use the bathroom/eat.

- Spend time 'going to the bathroom' and praising efforts and attempts. If they need you in the bathroom, then fine. Eventually wean yourself away. This may take quite a few times. Practice 'going' in the school.
- Bring some snacks and eat in the classroom or cafeteria. Perhaps bring a friend and have snack in the cafeteria! Practice EATING in the school.

Ø **Meet the teacher ASAP.**

Perhaps she/he will come to your home or meet you out of the school environment. For the very young SM child, not mentioning that this person is 'the teacher' is a tactic that has helped many lil' ones. Often our SM tikes will start chatting right way, given the right circumstances and 'lack of expectation' and when school is about to begin, the SM child has been talking to their teacher for some time now, that verbalization often flows wonderfully!

For the older child, meeting the teacher OUT of school is ideal but may not be as practical. Therefore, plan for a one on one meeting the teacher PRIOR to the start of school is highly recommended. Since social comfort precedes communication, this one on one interaction is the precursor to developing comfort and progression of communication!

The goal of this meeting is to build comfort, there should be no expectation for communication; however, educating your teacher PRIOR to this meeting is highly suggested! If you explain that your child will have difficulty with nonverbal communication, your teacher can perhaps stimulate simple handover/takeover interaction via simple games or activities... for the child who is able to communicate nonverbally, perhaps using the verbal intermediary (parent or friend) or for some, just one on one time and the use of direct/choice or yes/no questions may be enough to stimulate speech.

Some simple ideas to get to know the teacher:

- E-mail each other
- Spend time preparing the new room- gives our kids a feeling of pride and control.
- Meeting the teacher 'away' from the school
- Just allowing your child to 'be with the teacher' while the teacher 'sets up' and your child plays in the room is acceptable for our very anxious SM children
- Parents often alleviate anxiety, so meeting the teacher with Mom or Dad is advisable for the majority of children
- For older SM kids, speaking to the principal about a teacher whom your child will identify with the most or will be spending the most time with during the day is a good teacher to begin with. Again, just spending one on one time is a good start.

*****DO not forget about the art, science, music and gym teachers!
MEETING these individuals in a one on one basis (perhaps with a friend or two) PRIOR to the start of the school year is helpful!**

Prepare your child for school!

TALK TO YOUR CHILD about his/her typical day and what it will be like.

Even practice getting up early and preparing for school!

Bus rides are tough for many of our kids.

Recommendations:

- Ø Arrange that your child go on the bus with a friend (if possible)
- Ø Perhaps go to the bus station and 'check out the bus' if this is the first time your child will be going on the bus. Most school bus office personnel are more than happy to give your child a tour of the bus!
- Ø Speak to the bus driver ahead of time to give him/her a heads up to your child's jitters and anxiety. Please make them aware of your child's SM. They need to know that if your child is completely MUTE, that they need to keep a close eye on your child.
- Ø Arrange that your child sit in one of the first few seats near the bus driver or arrange that your child sit with an older neighbor or another child that you may know is going on the same bus
- Ø Perhaps drive your child (if necessary) the first few days and bring a friend with you!
- Ø When your child needs to take the bus or van, offering positive reinforcement helps many of our kids
- Ø Some parents will tell their children that they will MEET them at the school...some parents even follow the bus or van! In the majority of cases, it takes only one or two trips on your part to relieve anxiety for your child.

Questions:

(1) Are many of the above tactics and suggestions enabling our children's anxiety and mutism?

Answer: ABSOLUTELY NOT!! For communication to occur, a child must feel comfortable. MOST of the recommendations above help with building social comfort. Once that occurs, the precursor for the progression of communication has occurred!

(2) WHY is it so important to have ONE on ONE interaction with teachers and peers?

Answer: Social comfort is the precursor to communication. ONE ON ONE time allows for social comfort to be established in the most productive manner since most children are not comfortable in the hub bub of a filled class. Imagine the young child spending time alone in the class with a parent and/or friend and just the teacher. FOR some, this is all it takes to build the comfort and to become a more confident communicator. And with simple strategies some children will become verbal in such a setting. Then, transitioning into the classroom and accomplishing verbal communication is significantly more attainable! Imagine the older child who meets with his/her teacher one on one and has a two-way communication via journal writing, use of the verbal intermediary or perhaps via the RITUAL SOUND APPROACH.

Accomplishing social comfort and doing the necessary strategies to progress communicatively are MUCH more attainable in a one on one and 'few person' group than in a larger setting.

To sum up, SOCIAL COMFORT, best accomplished one on one is necessary to fuel the communication process. IF one on one interaction is NOT there, communication will be stifled.

(3) My child has been in the same school for 3 years. He already knows most peers and his new teacher. If he is so comfortable with them, why is he not verbal yet?

Answer: EXCELLENT QUESTION! This is one of the enigmas that perplex many about children with SM! However, I have learned that 'mute' behavior becomes learned and ingrained and that nonverbal children (especially elementary and older aged children), rarely BECOME verbal with just lowered anxiety. STRATEGIES/INTERVENTIONS are needed to progress from Nonverbal→Verbal communication by emphasizing the critical 'transitional stage' of communication. Strategies help the child UNLEARN behaviors and LEARN new ways of communication. Use of the verbal intermediary (gradual progression from whispering close up→ farther away), Ritual Sound Approach and use of augmentative devices are just SOME of the many strategies that children can utilize as they go from nonverbal→Transitional→Verbal stage of communication.

The start of school is scary and nerve wracking for most children, for our anxious SM children, the start of the school year can be terrifying! Finding ways to EASE into school with the ultimate goal of relieving anxiety will only HELP our children adjust to the start of the new school year with comfort, confidence and lowered anxiety.

SMART Center Inc. copyright Dr E Shipon-Blum. © Page concept, design and content are not to be reproduced unless for personal use.. Users are responsible for complying with all copyright and licensing restrictions