A Team Approach: Collaboration and Coordination with Schools

Janine Domingues, PhD
Selective Mutism Service
Outline for Tonight

- Selective Mutism: 101

- The Team Approach
  - Communication to Collaboration

- A Panel of Experts

- Discussion and Questions
Selective Mutism 101
A Brief Introduction
What is Selective Mutism?

- Persistent failure to speak in specific social situations when speaking is expected (e.g. school, extra-curricular activities, play dates) but speaks fluently in other situations (e.g. home)

- Causes impairment; interferes with educational achievement or with social communication

- Not due to a communication disorder

- Not due to lack of knowledge or discomfort with the language
Why do we care about selective mutism (SM)?

- Because children with SM clam up in public but typically talk like fabulous little chatterboxes at home
- Because children with SM suffer in silence
- Because SM is relentless if you have it
- *Just try not talking for a day*
- *Count how many people you talked to today.*
Current conceptualization of Selective Mutism

Nature and Nurture
Nature
Nurture

The Environment's Role in Shaping the Inhibited Stance
Child’s anxiety and adult’s anxiety are lowered*

Child gets (too) anxious

Behavioral Conceptualization

Adult rescues*

Child avoids

Negative reinforcement

Child is prompted to talk or engage
Long Series of Negatively Reinforced Interactions

- Becomes Automatic
- Rapid Fire on a Daily Basis
Good Intentions Gone Bad

Enabling plays a role in maintaining the silence
A Divided World

- Kids with SM divide the world into those they talk with and those they don’t

- Boundaries are not fluid

- Multiple variables influence these boundaries
People, Places, and Activities

◆ Unique variations from child to child

◆ Treatment needs to be individualized to these variations
  ► Same goal and same approach, but different starting points and different size steps
Goals of Treatment

- To have the child verbalize to more people, across settings and activities
- Develop Distress Tolerance
Generalization of gains to real world settings

Treatment sessions move systematically from the therapist’s office, to school, and the child’s real world settings
A Team Approach:
Moving from the office to the home, community, and school
Building the Foundation

Psychotherapy and Transparency
About Me: Kayla Derricott

Hi! My name is Kayla - I am 6 years old. I am working on overcoming Selective Mutism—a childhood anxiety disorder, in which extreme anxiety prevents children from speaking in some social settings. These same children talk normally in other places where they feel more secure. Children can completely overcome this disorder, but only with the right kind of help. I talk and yell and play just like everyone else at home, and with my friends and family, but for some reason I am more anxious speaking in school and some other community places. With your help, I can feel safer and more comfortable, and I will learn to speak here, too. I am doing really well in my treatment but in certain situations I still struggle. If you catch me talking one minute and the next minute I am silent, don’t be alarmed.

Please Help Me In These Ways

You can ask me a forced choice question (“Do you want the red pen, the blue pen or another color?”) because I tend to struggle with open-ended questions. Please try really hard not to ask me yes/no questions, because I may take the easy way out and just nod instead of talking or pick whichever choice pops in my head first. I also like to say, “I don’t know,” a lot! Please wait 5 seconds for a response. (This is slightly longer than feels comfortable to most people). It may also take me some time to follow directions. If I don’t respond after you wait the 5 seconds, you can repeat the question or you can rephrase the question. Please don’t mind read or speak for me, as I may take the easy way out. It’s hard but I need to learn to tell people what I need. Please give me positive feedback for my responses (“Thank you for telling me that” or “Great brave talking.”) and reflect verbalizations—repeat what I say.

Ways To Help Cont.

Please avoid any negative talk, or show of frustration or disappointment if I don’t respond. It’s harder for me than you might know. Please understand that I am not being intentionally rude or defiant by not talking. Polite words like “Hi” “Bye” “Thanks” and “I’m sorry” are especially difficult for kids like me with SM, and I am not able to consistently say them at this time. Please do not expect me to say them yet. Allow me to get up and use the bathroom and water fountain without asking but with a signal. Please let me know privately when that is ok, especially if the rest of the class will be told to remain seated. Please allow me frequent opportunities to move. I always need a full recess. Please do not mind read or speak for me, as I may take the easy way out.

Thanks! If you would like to learn more about Selective Mutism, please visit the Child Mind Institute website www.childmind.org or the Selective Mutism Group website http://www.selectivemutism.org or speak with my parents.

I love to ride my bike, play in the pool, swing, draw and play with all things Hello Kitty!

I love the beach!

Me and my sister Mya!
School Tips for Teachers of Children with SM

A brief description of the child, of SM, and briefly describing how it impacts the child…

Please help me in these ways…

◆ Speak in a calm and friendly voice

◆ At first remove all direct pressure to speak and when first meeting, instead comment on observations or activities (be a play by play announcer). “I have a great sense of humor so that may help to break the ice.”

◆ When I look comfortable (and my folks and therapist say I’m ready to move) you can ask my a forced choice question (i.e. “do you want to red pen or the blue pen?”) or an open ended question (i.e. “what color pen would you like?”). Please avoid “yes or no” questions.

◆ Please wait 5 seconds for me to respond. If I don’t respond after 5 seconds please repeat the question and wait again. Please don’t mind read or speak for me.

◆ Please give me positive feedback for my answer (i.e. “thank you for telling me that” or “great job brave talking”) and reflect verbalizations – repeat what I said.

◆ Please accept nonverbal responses and whispers should they occur.

◆ Please do not show frustration or engage in negative talk.

◆ Not being rude if I’m not saying “hello” or “goodbye.”

◆ Please allow me to get up to get a drink or go to the bathroom without asking.
Hi! My name is XXX - I am in Ms. XXXX 1st grade class and I am 7 years old. I am a joyful, creative, intelligent, active girl who loves to make art, build things, play with puzzles, play with animals, and do gymnastics (I am excellent at using the hula hoop!). I am also working on overcoming Selective Mutism—a childhood anxiety disorder, in which extreme anxiety prevents children from speaking in some social settings. These same children talk normally in other places where they feel more secure. Children can completely overcome this disorder, but only with the right kind of help. I talk and yell and play just like everyone else at home, and with my friends and family, but for some reason I am more anxious speaking in school and some other community places. With your help, I can feel safer and more comfortable, and I will learn to speak here, too.  

Please help me in these ways:  
Speak in a calm, friendly voice.  

At first, remove all direct pressure for me to speak—don’t use direct or indirect prompts to speak. My folks and I will work with you to know when I’m ready on my ladder of goals.  

When we first meet, avoid asking me direct questions until I am more comfortable. Instead, engage me by just commenting on an activity that I am doing, or making an observation that doesn’t require a response. My therapist calls this being a play-by-play announcer. I have a great sense of humor and sometimes, joking around will break the ice.  

When I look more comfortable, you can ask me a forced choice question (“Do you want the red pen or the blue pen?”) or an open-ended question (“What is your favorite food?”). Please try really hard not to ask me yes/no questions, because I may take the easy way out and just nod instead of talking, which is my goal.  

Please wait 5 seconds for a response. (This is slightly longer than feels comfortable to most people). It may also take me some time to follow directions.  

If I don’t respond after you wait the 5 seconds, you can repeat the question or you can rephrase the question (for example, use a forced choice question instead of open-ended one). Please don’t mind read or speak for me, as I may take the easy way out. It’s hard but I need to learn to tell people what I need.  

Please give me positive feedback for my responses (“Thank you for telling me that” or “Great brave talking.”) and reflect verbalizations—repeat what I say.  

Please accept my non-verbal responses and whispered responses, should they occur. Avoid any negative talk, or show of frustration or disappointment if I don’t respond. It’s harder for me than you might know.  

Please understand that I am not being intentionally rude or defiant by not talking. Polite words like “Hi” “Bye” “Thanks” and “I’m sorry” are especially difficult for kids like me with SM, and I am not able to consistently say them at this time. Please do not expect me to say them yet.  

Allow me to get up and use the bathroom and water fountain without asking but with a signal. Please let me know privately when that is ok, especially if the rest of the class will be told to remain seated.  

Please allow me frequent opportunities to move. I always need a full recess.  

Thanks! If you would like to learn more about Selective Mutism, please visit the Child Mind Institute website www.childmind.org or the Selective Mutism Group website http://www.selectivemutism.org or speak with my parents.
Behavioral Skills Training

◆ Distress Tolerance
◆ ‘Comfortably uncomfortable’
THE DO’S AND DON’T S OF SELECTIVE MUTISM

DO Label Praise for Talking
- Example of Labeled Praise: Thank you so much for telling me you want crackers for snack.
- Example of Labeled Praise: I love how you told me that you’re done with your worksheet.
- Rationale: As opposed to an unlabeled praise (“Good job!”), a labeled praise reinforces and shapes a very specific behavior (talking), thus increasing the likelihood of more talking in the future. Note: Cater Labeled Praise to the age and personality of the child. The enthusiasm and energy of a cheerleader may not be necessary or age appropriate. Find a style of praise that fits for the child. Some children may initially exhibit or even express discomfort with praise. This DOES NOT mean you should stop using praise, alternatively gradually build the child’s tolerance for praise by repeated and continued use adjusting frequency, volume and enthusiasm.

DO Reflect Verbalizations
- Example of a Reflection: You told me you need to go to the bathroom.
- Example of a Reflection: “Seven! You told me the answer is seven.”
- Rationale: Reflections demonstrate that the individual is listening and attending to the child’s verbalization, which also lets the child know that he or she was heard. Additionally, Reflections maintain a high rate of verbalizations between individuals and models an excellent use of language and listening skills.

DO be a Play-by-Play Announcer (Behavioral Descriptions)
- Example Behavior Description: You’re putting your colored pencils back in the pencil case.
- Example Behavior Description: You’re tying your shoelaces.
- Rationale: Behavior Descriptions let the child know that you are engaging with them, while also modeling proper and developed language. Additionally, Behavior Descriptions help you avoid mind-reading and pull for the child to elaborate or provide the verbal narrative related to what they are doing. Note: You may want to use a slower rate of behavior descriptions depending on the age and personality of the child, as a higher rate may not be as age-appropriate for older children.

DO Ask Forced Choice Questions
- Example Forced Choice: Do you want an apple or an orange with your lunch?
- Example Forced Choice: Is your favorite color blue or something else?
- Example Forced Choice: Does a hexagon have four sides or six sides, or are you not sure?
- Rationale: Forced choice questions provide two concrete options for the child, which can help reduce anxiety about decision-making and verbalization. Forced choice questions also minimize the child’s tendency to engage in a non-verbal response.

DO Ask Open Ended Questions
- Example of Open Ended: What did you eat for lunch today?
- Example of Open Ended: What do you want to be when you grow up?
- Example of Open Ended: What did you do over the weekend?
- Rationale: As treatment progresses and the child develops a history of verbalizations with a specific individual, it is then appropriate to move on to asking open ended questions. Open ended questions can be more difficult for the child to answer, as it often requires decision-making, risk taking, or formulating one’s own answer. Similar to Forced Choice Questions, Open ended questions minimize the child’s tendency to engage in a non-verbal response.

DO Wait 5 Seconds to Respond
- Example of Waiting 5 Seconds: “Do you want animal crackers or pretzels?” WAIT 5 SECONDS.... “Would you like animal crackers or pretzels?”
- Rationale: After asking a forced choice or open-ended question, make sure to wait five seconds before repeating the question. This gives the child a chance to process the question (some children with SM may also have processing issues) and formulate their answer. If the child does not respond after 5 seconds, repeat the question in a very neutral tone. It is important to wait five seconds between questions in order to give the child an opportunity to respond because if the child is asked too many questions with no opportunity to respond, a history of non-verbalization is created and may be further reinforced.

DO NOT Ask Yes/No Questions
- Example of Yes/No Questions: Do you have your homework?
- Example of Yes/No Questions: Do you want snack?
- Example of Yes/No Questions: Are you ready to line-up?
- Rationale: Yes or no questions give the child an opportunity to use non-verbal responses (shaking/nodding head or pointing) while also creating a history of being non-verbal with the individual. Note: If you accidentally ask a yes/no question and the child engages non-verbally, you can describe their behavior and reframe the question into a forced choice question. Example: “You are nodding. Do you have your homework... or do you not have your homework?”

DO NOT Mind Read
- Example of Mind Reading: (Child is stacking blocks.) “Looks like you are building a castle!”
- Rationale: Although the attempt to engage with the child is well intended, assuming that the blocks are a castle when in fact the child may think it is something completely different may be problematic. The child may not be at a point where he/she is able to verbalize and correct the individual, thus creating more anxiety around verbalizing.
- Alternatively, in this situation stick to Behavior Descriptions: “You are building with the blocks.” By simply describing what the child is doing you are positively attending to their behavior and your expressed interest may elicit the child’s desire to elaborate or give you the narrative.
- Child: “It is a castle.”
DO NOT Give Direct Prompts to Talk*

- Example of a Direct Prompt to Talk: Tell me the answer to question number 5 on the worksheet.
- Example of a Direct Prompt to Talk: Tell the visitor your name.
- Example of a Direct Prompt to Talk: Turn to your partner and tell them your favorite color.
- Rationale: The child may not be at a stage in treatment where he/she is able to succeed at verbally responding to the direct prompt. If the child then avoids responding to the direct prompt, this adds to the history of non-verbalization.

DO NOT Give Indirect Prompts to Talk*

- Example of Indirect Prompts to Talk: Why don’t you sing the song with us?
- Example of Indirect Prompts to Talk: How about you tell me your favorite color?
- Example of Indirect Prompts to Talk: Why don’t you tell the class your name?
- Rationale: The child may not be at a stage in treatment where they are able to succeed at verbally responding to the indirect prompt. Though the prompt to talk is framed in a different way, it has the same effect as a direct prompt and should be avoided.

DO NOT Prompt for Hello, Good-Bye, Thank You, Please*

- Example: “Hello Sara...[pause indicating an expectation to respond with a Hello.”
- Example: “Say Good-Bye to your teacher.”
- Example: “Please say thank-you to your friend for handing you the worksheet.”
- Rationale: Although we certainly want to instill pro-social skills and positive manners in all of our children, these are prompts to verbalize. A child’s inability to verbally engage in these interactions IS NOT an indication that they are being rude or that they do not use these manners. These prompts for verbalizations are often the most challenging for children with Selective Mutism to succeed in. The added expectation to verbalize in these interactions and anxiety about how others perceive their inability to respond, as well as the really high rate of daily prompts for these interactions likely make the degree of difficulty higher. Additionally, adults discomfort with a child not engaging in these societally expected forms of verbal communication could add to the perceived pressure around these interactions. Please provide non-verbal accommodations until a child is able to succeed verbally. Example: “Wave good-bye.”

DO NOT Use Negative Talk

- Example of Negative Talk: Don’t be shy.
- Example of Negative Talk: You can’t go to recess until you answer my question.
- Example of Negative Talk: It’s impolite to not say hello/please/thank you.
- Rationale: Negative talk may cause the child to become more anxious about verbalizing and ultimately cause talking to be viewed as a form of punishment.

*The use of Forced Choice and Open Ended questions and Direct and Indirect prompts to talk is dependent on where the child is in the treatment progression. At first there is no expectation for the child to speak and all questions and prompts for responsive speech should not be used at all. As treatment progresses, fade in Forced Choice, then Open-Ended, then fade in Direct prompts. Avoid Indirect prompts all together (the nature of an indirect prompt makes verbalizing optional)
Identify Your ‘Key Player’

Pass the Bravery Baton
Create a Map and Begin Fading into the Setting

Building Brave Muscles (success) along the way
### TALKING MAP

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<th>Home</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grandma's House</th>
<th>Gymnastics</th>
<th>Soccer</th>
<th>Store</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Main Classroom</td>
<td>Gym</td>
<td>Art</td>
<td>Music</td>
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Our goal is to fill this Talking Map with as many X’s as possible. An X represents the child’s ability to verbalize to this person, in this setting and/or activity.
Helping XXXX Be Successful in Her New Classroom

We have found that children with Selective Mutism are most successful in a new environment when they are faded in systematically. Here is a mapped out process to Fade-in XXXX and help her acclimate to the new classroom environment.

1. Go with family member (mom or dad and/or sisters or brother) to classroom when the school is empty. This can be before the start of the school year or on a weekend. Find out if the school has a summer camp and initially avoid times and days in which there might be lots of people in the school. Bring several activities that XXXX really enjoys and is familiar with (games she is very good at or games that engage and build excitement). Once in the school setting, XXXX and family member(s) will play games/activities, and establish a precedent of speaking in and around the school building and ideally, within her new classroom. We have never had a problem with a school allowing a family to come visit the school over the summer or in the weeks before the start of the year when staff and faculty are frequently in the school cleaning or setting up their classrooms. Call the school in advance to coordinate the visit and insure that someone will be able to let you into the building. Repeat these visits 1-3 times, or until XXXX is less inhibited speaking to the family member in this environment; not necessary that she speaks spontaneously or at full-volume.

2. Repeat Step 1. However, this time have a teacher or school staff member there as well. Ask the school to help you coordinate a time in which you can overlap with one of her teachers or a staff member that XXXX will be in contact with over the course of the next school year (counselor, nurse, specials teachers)
   • Begin the visit with just the family member and XXXX building momentum with her previous history of verbalizing in this environment to the family member alone. Find a place, ideally her classroom, to settle down and build momentum engaging and verbalizing in a fun game.
   • Fade teacher or staff member into the classroom. Ask the teacher or staff member to enter the room casually and engage in some independent activities around the room (Teachers will frequently come into the room and begin cleaning or setting up). Initially, the teacher should not try to engage in the play with XXXX and the family member and should avoid any questions directed at XXXX. The family-member can acknowledge the teacher’s presence, but remain actively engaged with XXXX. It is important that the family member maintain his or her own high rate of verbalizing during this transition time. Family member should be using Do’s and Don’ts and avoiding all questions during the initial 5-10 minutes during this transition.
   • Family member should begin prompting for responsive speech with the use of Forced Choice questions. Build momentum of XXXX’s ability to verbalize to family member in the presence of the teacher in the room.
   • Fade teacher into the verbal interaction.
   • Fade parent out and have session with just teacher and XXXX in the classroom.
*Helpful Tips:*
- Do not specifically target volume. Alternatively, have XXXX begin by keeping her arms by her sides, and mom holding straight posture instead of leaning in to whisper. Gradually increase the distance between mom and XXXX with whispering.
- Be very systematic and gradual. Be patient! Momentum will build, but these initial steps take lots of rehearsal and practice so that they can become overlearned.
- Keep energy level up. XXXX becomes less inhibited overall when she begins moving around the room and engaging physically in the activity as well as verbally.

3. Once XXXX is less inhibited and speaking audibly with teacher, introduce a peer into the classroom. Preferably, a child in her class and/or a peer she is already familiar with through playdates. Continue sessions until XXXX is able to speak directly to peer.

4. The next step, as XXXX has succeeded with increased verbalizations with teacher and a peer would be to take XXXX (with teacher or peer) to other areas of the school where she would be prompted to speak (the library, the cafeteria, the media room)

It is important to establish a **rewards system** throughout the entire Fade-in process. With younger children we use stickers as an immediate reinforcement to praise and shape verbalizations and behavioral engagement. However, it is important for parents to establish a rewards menu with XXXX prior to the visits and remind XXXX of this as she advances. It is helpful to consistently remind her that the reward awaits as she is prompted to speak throughout the process. As always, labeled praise specifically targeting verbalizations and behavioral engagement is a crucial aspect of the intervention.
Building Momentum

A daily dose (overlearning theory)
Setting up for Success

Accommodating versus Enabling
Sample Accommodations

- Establish non-verbal cues for safety
  - bathroom, eating, health
- Build on strengths and areas of interest
- Normalize and validate “worries” with entire class
- Allow for early arrival (warm-up time)
- Preferential seating
- Buddy system
- Use of Skills
Sample Accommodations

- Video taping
- Small group opportunities
- 1:1 support during key activities
- 1:1 support throughout the day
  - Oldest 2nd grader on the planet!
- Transition plan for next school year begins in April
- Peer and teacher selection
- Develop a 504 or request an IEP
Communication

- Daily back and forth book
  - With weekly SSQ tracking progress

- Weekly Team updates
  - Email, Skype, conference calls

- Team Websites
  - Posting videos
A New Teacher... A New School... A New Classroom

- A new setting can be an amazing opportunity for momentum (frog leaps)

- Begin building familiarity with setting and teachers asap (avoid contamination!)
  - Coordinate visits for the student before the school year starts (with parent)
  - Find out who the teacher is as early as possible
  - Identify some peers that will be in same class
The Importance of Summer

**Question:** What does the summer mean for children with SM?

**Answer:** The same thing for kids without SM!

- More time with friends
- Family vacations
- Camp
- A chance to re-invent yourself
- An opportunity to increase activity
- An opportunity to grow!

The difference for kids with SM is that summer *also* provides an opportunity for building on past successes, which requires some extra planning.
Helpful Resources

◆ Selective Mutism Group (SMG)
  ► www.selectivemutism.org

◆ Child Mind Institute (CMI)
  ► www.childmind.org

◆ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)
  ► www.aacap.org

◆ Parent-Child Interaction Therapy International
  ► www.pcit.org