

**“Differentiating Exposures at School:
“Meaningful Goals for Each Stage of the Child’s Journey”
Selective Mutism Association
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Webinar Q and A**

Q- At breakfast, our daughter does well with forced choice, but anytime we evolve to open ended, she asks for choices. I can’t tell if this is age appropriate (4) or if it is something we need to work through. Any suggestions?

A- You can try to give more checks for telling her own choice and look for times the child does this more on her own. When she does make a choice on her own (without being given options, be sure to praise this– “great making a choice on your own”)

Q- I have a student who is SM. Her parents are aware, but she has not had any kind of intervention at this point (she is in 1st grade, but the last couple of years Covid has really put a strain on families getting assistance). Parents have asked what type of help is available for her outside of school. What professional(s) would you recommend to parents? A speech therapist? Psychologist?

A- A diagnosis can come from a variety of mental health professionals, but you want to advise the parent to look for someone who specializes in SM if possible and at least anxiety disorders in young children. Social workers, psychologists and other mental health providers are a good start and ones that do treatment and not just diagnosis (eg pediatrician)

Q- I am finding it difficult to understand how direct prompts would be providing more scaffolding than forced choice. Can you help explain?

A- A direct prompt “Tell me if you like blue” is a reasonable question to ask. When we say “forced choice,” what we mean is giving a few options to choose from, which can be easier than something more open. For example- “do you want to play card, do a puzzle, or something else” may be easier to respond to than “what do you want to play”

Q- I have been told as a parent to “be collaborative” rather than the expert that, frankly, I am - relative to every school I have worked with. SM is just not widely known or understood. How do you avoid being overbearing as a parent while essentially training schools on strategies like fade-ins?

A- It's a balance. Sometimes, we see parents that we work with be more skillful and “expert” than the school folks they are working with (from treatment, reading etc). I always advise to be transparent AND collaborative- “I know you are the educators and I really value and respect that. I know a lot that I didn't before about SM and really want to share that. How can we best collaborate?”

Q- how should teachers respond to a student that meows but doesn't use words? how do we try to move past this stage?

A- We think of alter voices (meows, squeaks etc) as part of the path to verbalizing. I would work with other interventionists (speech, counselor) and also do things like praise hearing the child's voice and increasing incentive to verbalize. If there has not been a fade in, you might need one (with parent or other person with whom the child talks)

Q- What if stutter occurs at home some and fear of others hearing voice how you get past that

A- Many children say that they don't want others to hear their voice. This is not uncommon. I tend to validate “I know that's something that's hard and we are working on it” and I still work on brave talking with small steps. I don't wait for the child to be more “ok” with their voice being heard. That comfort or at least practice will come with time.

For stuttering, you may want to consider an evaluation/treatment with a speech therapist - they can work with your child on scaffolding intentional activities that help desensitize them to stuttering and teach strategies to help decrease stuttering. At home, good strategies to use are to give lots of wait time, don't draw attention to the stuttering, and don't try to finish the child's sentences for them. It can also be really helpful in moments where you (parent) stumble over your words or stutter to notice that aloud - “Oh, I just stuttered on that word. That happens to everyone, we all stutter sometimes.”

and be very matter-of-fact and nonchalant about it - this helps normalize it and make it less scary for the child.

Q- Would cards be better than white boards til talk speech starts?

A- In terms of using writing white boards etc. They often are used and can be something that is used exclusively. I see these tools as temporary accommodations while working toward talking. So- if we are working on talking more to the teacher 1:1 and in the class, the child is told "please write down the answer you got to # 4" I am good with that. When the use of a white board is the only plan, then there isn't really a move toward talking. So if the goal is speaking, then there should be an active plan to be working on that too.

Q- I've heard at previous workshop to offer rewards to get at least eye contact to mouth words to respond when in public grocery stores restaurants if child still refuses to talk you have any other suggestions. I also only successful in only getting whisper in mom ears. How get mouthing so a known person meet in public will see even if won't talk yet

A- I think this question has to do with taking small steps and rewarding them. If the child is not yet able to use eye contact or speak other than in the parent's ear, we start there. If the child whispers, we say "great answering," Then next time, the parent can move a little bit away or have the child say the response one more time. And if the parent repeats what the child says (in their ear) then the other person in public will hear it amplified by the parent, which is a great start. I work on eye contact with strangers later on.

Q- Classroom jobs child likes to do what if still refuses to talk how you enforce carrying white board or writing tablet to ask those ?s and how you go from that to talking even if few words

A- If the child likes jobs, I love that. It gets the child involved. if you have a few words- that's where you want to start- you want to praise that and expand from there. If the child is not yet able to speak, can prompt them "please carry the white board and write your answer"

Q- Will raise hand but won't talk only write still how you get to say for a start

A- I use a lot of practice ahead of time - tell the child the question, have them come up with their answer, practice asking them the question and them answering you without raising hand lots of times, and then practice raising hand and answering the question - giving lots of predictability initially. Having the child write their answer if able and then read it instead of think on the spot also can help

Q- Is SM categorized as a speech and language problem that would create a need for an IEP?

A- There are 13 disability categories that are recognized by the federal IDEA legislation, and if a child meets eligibility criteria under one or more of these categories and has a demonstrated need for specially designed instruction within the school setting, they would be eligible for an IEP. Different states and districts interpret this eligibility criteria differently, though. I have had success qualifying students for IEPs under the Speech or Language Impairment category by demonstrating that it is a deficit in social language skills. In other cases, children may qualify under Other Health Impairment if they have a documented anxiety or SM diagnosis. Still other districts will put all mental health diagnoses (including anxiety) under the "Emotional Disturbance" classification. It doesn't matter so much what the label is, but rather that appropriate services and supports can be put in place for the child.

Q- My granddaughter just turned 14 and will be going to highschool in the fall. She has regressed since Covid and remote learning last year. She only talks to me, her parents and her aunt. She did have a couple of friends that she would talk a bit to but does not talk to them now. She did attend a SM camp when she was younger. All of this seminar sounds good but she is not in a place where she has the therapists or teachers that are versed in SM that can do all of this in a normal school setting. I am very worried about her in high school.

A- Transitions to middle and high school are challenging. There are more people (teachers and staff) and because the child is now a teen, they need to be involved in planning and treatment more than younger kids. Planning ahead by working with the current school to transfer speech to one person in the new school would be a good first goal. It can be really overwhelming to think about

all of the teachers at once and I would try to focus on one or two - Also- if there is a person at the middle school who the child talks to, they can often help with the transition

Q- What if the parent can't come in for fade ins.

A- - It may be possible to use technology here - if parent is able to attend the fade-in with Facetime/Zoom, this can be a flexible solution.

Q- How have you seen wearing masks affect kids with SM?

A- - Yes and no - some kids have been more able to talk because they feel "protected" and it provides them some added safety. Other kids, especially who were in a really quiet whisper may be harder to understand, and are sometimes harder to hear. Anecdotally, most of my kids have not been particularly affected one way or the other and have actually been quite adaptable.

Q- Is there parent training in Spanish?

A- YES--- FIU (Florida International) has resources on their website and us too

Q- How do we transfer speech from a successful virtual fade-in sessions with teachers to in-person classroom situations?

A- It takes patience. I have seen kids do very well virtually and then still need additional practice in person. Just because the child is speaking to the therapist or teacher virtually does not mean that it automatically transfers to the class. However, I have been told by parents that they have seen it move faster (and the fact that everyone has been practicing skills helps too!)

Q- What if parents are not allowed in school. And they are the only person the student talks to in private? We've been told we aren't allowed to have the parent in to do the fade in in the school. How would you suggest working with this constraint?

A- sometimes, it's worth asking again even with COVID protocols- we have seen some flexibility around fade ins. If that is not possible, I have coached parents to be in the parking lot, playground and even entrance to the school for fade ins. Using technology can be really helpful here - having the parent on Zoom/Facetime may be enough to support the fade-in process for some kids. It may also be possible to be flexible with location - conducting fade-ins on the playground, outside of the school, etc and transferring speech to the new conversational partner that way

Q How can you cater a script for teens?

A- It can be helpful to be more "low key" with teens - less "Wow, great job telling me that!" and more, "Oh, that's cool, thanks." Also including the teen and being both transparent and collaborative is key. For example, saying "I know these scripts might seem awkward, and we are using them to help with talking

Q- Ok, so in theory that is wonderful. But how would you suggest doing this in a school where we have serious time constraints?

A- You cannot rush the process here. You don't need tons of time in one session- we need productive time. So- if a teacher or staff has 10 min, we have to figure out how to use those 10 min. If they can do 15, even better. This is why having a 504 or IEP is important, so the interventions needed can be put on that plan and then everyone is held accountable. To illustrate- if we have 15 min for a fade in, we have to make sure that we aren't skipping steps because we are rushed. It's better to take it slower and use the 10 min to build comfort or stay at the first step than try to rush through the whole thing.

Q- What if the parent isn't on board, or the parent is not helpful in this process so they've been told they can't facilitate this. So what do you do when you literally don't have this person for the fade in?

A- That is VERY hard. I would watch some of the webinars we have to learn some of the SM skills you may be able to use depending on if the child interact with you and can engage. You might want to attend an SM training and then

you want to also try to engage the parents again- remember what the parents see at home likely is not the same thing that you see at school.

Q- What if the child answers to the NCP consistently and then stops after the parent leaves. Does one have to start back again?

A- This usually means you've moved too quickly through the process. It helps to back up to where the child was last successful and re-establish speech with the familiar person, get some more momentum, and then try fading out more slowly. You may not need to go all the way back to the beginning

Q- I am a little worried that by me going into the school, when I try to leave, my child will get upset. So far, my child does not cry or worries during drop off. I believe is bc is a fast process (car line) vs me being in the classroom.

A- We plan for this. Let the child know you are coming to help with brave talking and you will be there for X amount of time. Use rewards and lots of praise.

Q- Would a single verbal response be considered "successfully verbal" in a fade-in? Ex. Teacher says, "Hi Sally" and child says "hi."

A- That's a great transfer of speech, but remember we want to practice, practice, practice to build momentum - so we'd aim for multiple successful verbalizations with the new conversational partner and the most important thing is that the talking "sticks." If the child continues to speak in one word responses, that's great!

Q- When we say "ask mom" our daughter says "no, you tell" or grunts... any advice?

A- Here is where reward charts can be helpful - you can reframe as, "We're practicing you telling me (mom) right now. For your next checkmark/sticker, go ahead and tell me which color you want."

Q- What are the expectations with our covid-kids, that have had a lot of time avoiding for the past two years. My son is becoming/is school defiant, and the

school is willing to do the fade ins. Should we still do them even if he doesn't go to school?

A- yes for sure- you can do this virtually too- And- you may need to start with just practicing first going to the school without the expectation to speak and then add the talking. In other words, many of us have been avoiding going places (first due to COVID and then maybe due to anxiety) We can reinforce practicing going to places that are hard (reward and praise and PRACTICE)