Selective Mutism in the Schools: Resources for Supporting Intervention and Collaboration

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Overview

1. SM Symptoms in Schools and Long-Term Impacts on Functioning

2. Collaboration with the Team

3. Engaging a child with SM in your School

4. Classroom Accommodations

5. Strategies for Direct Intervention

6. Addressing Peers

7. IEP/504s

DSM-V Criteria

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A. Consistent failure to speak in specific social situations in which there is an expectation for speaking (e.g., school) despite speaking in other situations

B. The disturbance interferes with educational or occupational achievement or with social communication

C. The duration of the disturbance is at least 1 month (not limited to the first month of school)

D. The failure to speak is not attributable to a lack of knowledge of, or comfort with, the spoken language required in the social situation

E. The disturbance is not better explained by a communication disorder (e.g., childhood-onset fluency disorder) and does not occur exclusively during the course of autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, or another psychotic disorder

What SM Can Look Like in Schools

• Not responding verbally to school staff

• Not responding verbally to peers

• Not asking for help on schoolwork

• Not sharing self-care needs (e.g., using bathroom, going to nurse when sick/injured, not informing about issues with peers)

• Difficulty engaging in certain academic tasks (e.g., reading out loud, writing, certain testing expectations, singing in music class, morning meeting participation, class presentations)

• Difficulty communicating nonverbally (e.g., freezing, awkward body movements, poor eye contact)

• Long latency in responding (i.e., time between when an expectation for response is presented and the child responds)

Impact of Selective Mutism

- Academic
  - Unable to assess abilities
  - Unknown strengths or challenges

- Social
  - Difficult to make and sustain friendships
  - Treated as younger or less capable

- Self-advocacy skills
  - Unable to ask for help on assignments
  - Unable to get needs met (e.g., asking for the restroom or nurse)

- Emotional
  - Higher incidence of school refusal
  - More likely to self-medicate with drugs and/or alcohol
  - Higher risk for later GAD, Specific Phobia, MDD, Severe Social Anxiety, and Avoidant Personality Disorder

Black & Uhde, 1995; Dow et al., 1995; Dummit et al., 1997; Gidden et al., 1997; Jackson et al., 2005; Kristensen, 2000; Krysanski, 2003; Murris & Ollendick, 2015; Yeganeh et al., 2003

School Collaboration

Plan for Addressing SM Needs to Be:

Comprehensive

A Combination of Accommodations and Intervention

Fluid and Changing As the Child Grows

School Team

Primary School Staff:

Classroom Teacher

Special Education Teacher (If student has qualified)

School Psychologist/School Counselor

Optional School Staff:

Specials Teachers (e.g., gym, art, music)

School Specialists (e.g., Speech/Language, OT)

Interventionists (e.g., reading, math)

Social Worker

Front Office Staff

Lunchroom Staff

Classroom Aides

Bus Driver

Administration

Outside School Team Members:

Parents

Outside Therapist

Siblings/Other Peers in Different Classes that Child May Communicate With (e.g., Neighbor Friend)

Before Start of School Year

- Staff Training
- Warm-Up/Exposure Sessions with Necessary Staff
- Recommendations for Families
- Review of School Plan

Start of School Year

- Goal Setting for First Quarter/Semester
- Review of Accommodation Plan
- Coordinating Services
- Maintaining Communication

Throughout Year
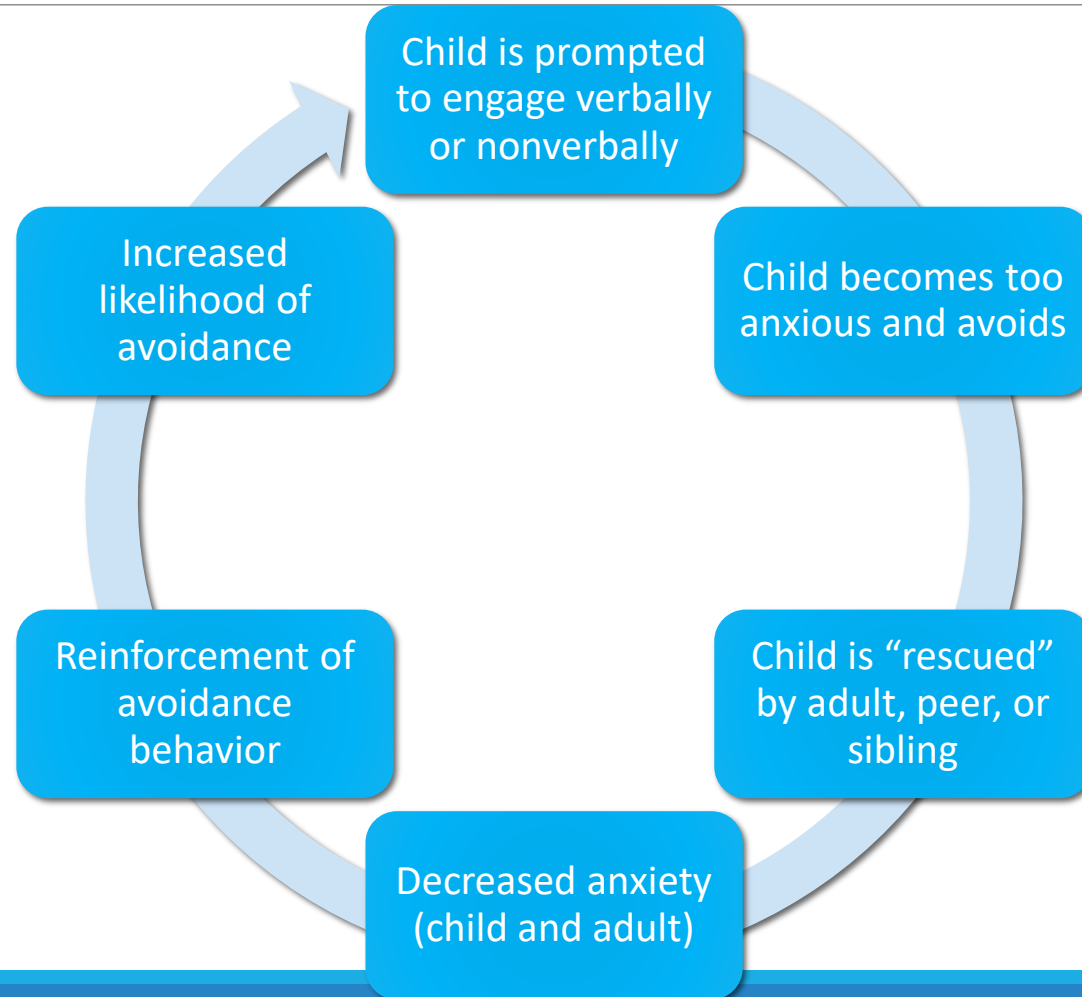
- Review Growth
- Revise Goals as Needed

End of Year

- Exposure Opportunities with New Staff
- Review of Accommodation/Intervention Plans
- Discuss Summer Goals and Plan for Next Year

General Strategies for Engaging with a Child with SM

Behavior Reinforcement

Child is prompted to engage verbally or nonverbally

Child becomes too anxious and avoids

Child is "rescued" by adult, peer, or sibling

Decreased anxiety (child and adult)

Reinforcement of avoidance behavior

Increased likelihood of avoidance

Kotrba, 2015

What To Do

If Child is Nonverbal toward Staff Member:

- Create a comfortable, safe, and nurturing environment
- Provide statements instead of questions (e.g., "Good to see you" instead of "How are you doing?")
- Use declarative sentences or commands (e.g., "Come over to my desk" instead of "Do you want to come to my desk?")
- Be a sportscaster and verbalize what you see the child doing (e.g., "You are getting out your notebook and pencil")
- Accept any communication (e.g., nodding/shaking, finger choices, writing)
- Allow a child to observe others engaging in activities before asking them to participate
- Minimize special attention placed on a child

What to Do Continued

If Child is Verbal Toward/Around Staff Member:

◦ Treat them as any other child when they verbally respond

◦ Provide specific praise around communication behavior (e.g., "Thank you for sharing", "Thank you for letting me know.")

◦ Reflect back what they have shared with you (e.g., "You said you want chocolate milk with lunch")

◦ Use forced choice options if asking a specific question to the child (e.g., Is this a time when we would use addition, subtraction, or something else to answer the problem?)

◦ Wait 10-15 seconds for the child to respond

◦ Give children with SM predictable responses

◦ Intercept speech if the child is responding to another adult/peer and you hear/understand what is being said

What Not to Do

- Quiz the child or ask questions rapidly without verbal responses

- Modify to Yes/No questions

- Ask indirect questions (e.g., "Would you like to come to my desk?")

- Force the child to speak (e.g., "You are going to tell me the answer.")

- Criticize the child for their communication difficulties (e.g., "Why won't you talk to me" "You are going to have to start talking sometime.")

- Provide sarcastic responses (e.g., "Wow. You really talk a lot!")

- Indicate that the child does not or can't speak (e.g., "Hannah doesn't talk")

- Make a big deal if the child does say something (e.g., "OH MY YOU TALKED!!!!!! CLASS DID YOU HEAR THAT!!!!")

- Correct the child if they provide a verbal response

- Read the child's mind (e.g., child looks at a glass of water, "Oh! You must want water")

SM Support for ALL School Staff

- Training opportunities for staff to:
  - Better understand SM and its impact
  - Better understand their role in supporting a child in the school

- Training can occur during:
  - In-Service Days
  - Regular Staff Meetings

- Information Fact Sheet:
  - Overview of SM
  - Information about specific child with SM
  - General Do's and Do Not's reminders for Staff

Selective Mutism Information

Selective Mutism is a childhood anxiety disorder in which children have difficulty speaking in select situations, such as school, despite their ability to speak normally in situations where they are comfortable, such as home. Consider three factors that often control how comfortable a child is when talking; the audience watching the child talk, the performance expectations for the conversations, and the familiarity with the conversational partner. Children who are reluctant to talk tend to do better when they are more familiar with the speaker, when there is less audience, and when the performance expectations are not too high.

About Katie: Katie is a silly and fun-loving 8-year old girl. She loves make-believe games at home and often pretends to be one of her favorite Disney characters. She will joke, laugh, and share lots with her family, especially her sister. However, in school, Katie is less comfortable using her words with school staff. She loves school and often shares at home how much she enjoys her classes. In person, she becomes quiet and tends to freeze if asked unexpected questions or when expected to share something in front of less comfortable adults. Please keep some general recommendations in mind when you see Katie in the school building.

Do:

- Create a comfortable, safe, and nurturing environment for children with selective mutism
- Use forced choice options if the child is struggling to answer an open-ended question (e.g., Is this a time when we would use addition, subtraction, or something else to answer the problem?)
- Provide statements instead of questions when we are not expecting the child to respond to us (e.g., "Good to see you today" instead of "How are you doing?")
- Accept any communication (e.g., nodding/shaking, finger choices, writing)
- Use peer dyads with comfortable peers to elicit communication
- Allow a child to observe others engaging in activities before asking them to participate
- Use declarative sentences or commands if the child is less likely to respond verbally (e.g., "Grab a pencil and come over to my desk" instead of "Do you want to come to my desk?")
- Minimize special attention placed on a child
- Treat them as any other child when they verbally respond (e.g. "Thank you for sharing", "Thank you for letting me know.")
- Wait 10-15 seconds for the child to respond

Do Not:

- Don't let peers be intermediaries (e.g., talking for the child)
- Quiz the child or ask questions rapidly without verbal responses
- Force the child to speak (e.g., "You are going to tell me the answer.")
- Criticize the child for their communication difficulties (e.g., "Why won't you talk to me" "You are going to have to start talking sometime.")
- Provide sarcastic responses (e.g., "Wow. You really talk a lot!")

Classroom Accommodations

Accommodations

Assessments

- Pointing
- Writing
- Video/Audio of work samples at home to demonstrate skills
- Allowing parent to be involved in testing procedures

Presentations/All Group Activities

- Audio or Video Recordings
- Completed on 1:1 or small group basis
- Alternative assignment (e.g., writing a paper)

Accommodations Continued

Classroom Supports

- Writing in notebook/whiteboard/communication journal/email
- Use of nonverbal communication (finger and hand motions)
- Place near preferred/comfortable peer or pair child with comfortable peer for classwork
- No pressure for verbal communication
- Modified questions to forced-choice responses
- Access to 1:1 time with teacher
- Note for substitute teacher explaining different needs for child
- Laminated Self-Advocacy Cards-bathroom, nurse or special signal allowed

Accommodation vs. Intervention

- What is accommodation in SM:
  - Allowing for nonverbal engagement or modified verbal engagement in places where expectations for verbal engagement are present

- Accommodation should not be the only school approach (e.g., provide 504 and allow for nonverbal in all situations throughout school)

- Accommodation and Intervention are both necessary

- Intervention Opportunities should be:
  - Targeted to situations where goals have been established
  - Based on previous performance of the child

Strategies for Direct Intervention

Model for Intervention Steps

Audience: Number of people watching and listening to a child who is talking

Performance: Expectations for the conversation

Familiarity: Conversational partner or topic

Core Team Training and Planning

◦ Practice with intervention strategies (e.g., fading in/warm-up, forced-choice questions)

◦ Decisions on how to address possible challenges in classroom (e.g., substitute teacher, peer responses)

◦ Goal-setting with team

◦ Plan for tracking and monitoring progress

School Intervention Strategies

1. Exposure Hierarchies

2. Fade-In Opportunities

3. Reinforcement Systems

Exposure Hierarchies
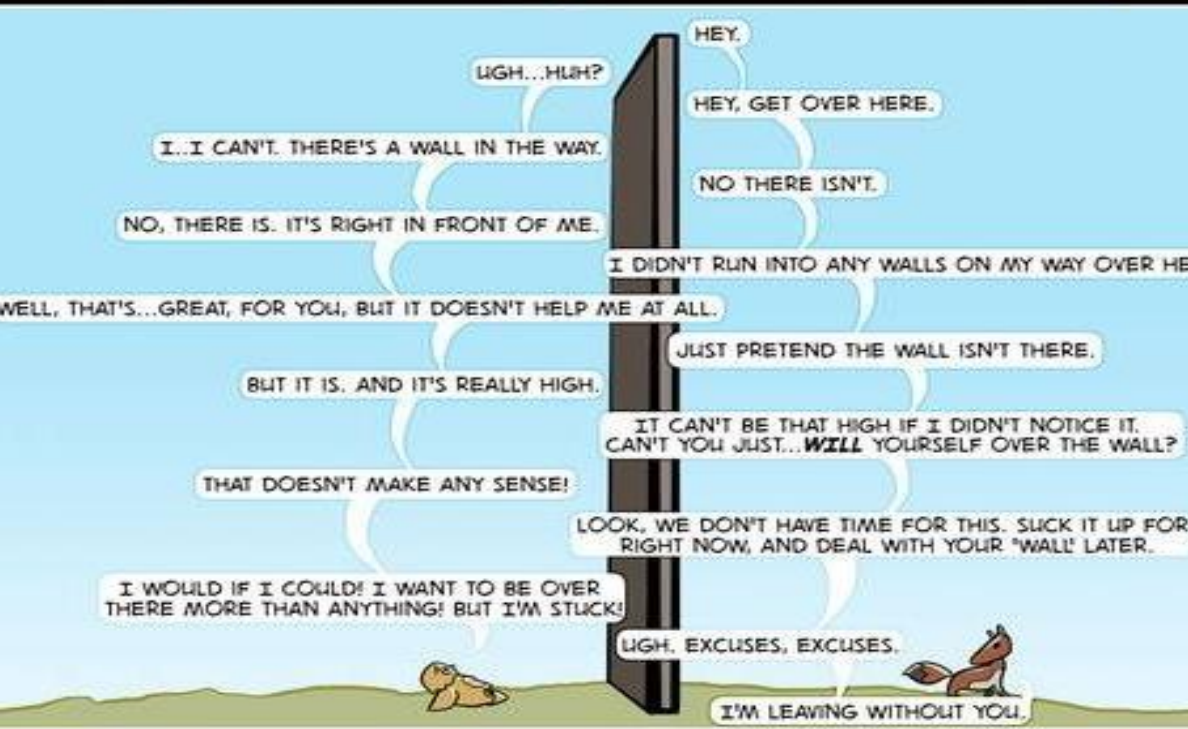
Exposure Hierarchies- Bravery Ladders

- Gradual steps to help children approach communication goals

- Ladders can be for specific goals or more broad goals
  - Develop a list of talking scenarios/gradual communication goals
  - Have client rate level of comfort with talking situations
  - Place these ranked situations into a hierarchy

- Level of child involvement in process depends on age. Older children should be a part of the process in goal setting.

Bravery Ladder Broad Goal

Goal: Getting more comfortable answering questions in front of groups of people

Answer questions in a large group at school

    Answer questions in a small group at school

      Answer questions in a small group with teacher and 3 preferred peers

      Answer questions in a small group with teacher and 2 preferred peers

      Answer question to a small group with teacher and 1 preferred peer

      Answer questions to a teacher at school in classroom 1:1

        Answer questions to a familiar person at school while 1:1

        Answer questions to a familiar family member

Bravery Ladder Specific Goal

Sharing Goal:

Comfort before next stage: 8.5 of 10

GOAL

Share information to a couple people in person
Share with teacher at table together
Sharing in room with teacher on other side of room
Sharing in room with teacher in doorway
Have conversation after recording about what teacher heard-answering with Y/N questions
Have other school questions when talking with friend/recording with door open a little
Sharing with/without recording with door a little more open (mouth, whisper, full volume)
Teacher closer to group conversations in class
Sharing while door cracked-video/no video with a friend (mouth, whisper, full volume)
Over phone sharing with teacher (mouth, whisper, full volume)
Teacher outside room when recording and watch with teacher
Video recording sharing about weekend and watch with teacher
Get to know person first-meet and play game/Lunch group or special activity

Always Have a Plan B

What is a Plan B?
- Alternate option for engaging if the step that was planned it too big
- Take ownership for jumping too quickly

The Value of Creativity

- Children feel less inhibited and more confident when engaging in activities that are of interest or highlight their talents

Elementary	Middle	High School
- Lunch Bunch with friends and fading in new staff (8) - Would You Rather with peers in class (7) - Arts and crafts with teacher (6) - Beating teacher in puzzle game (7) - Answering mock interview questions for child who wanted to become a teacher (11)	- Opportunity to be teacher helper (12) - Answering questions about self initially via email (12) - Recording videos about self to share with teacher (13) - Playing Uno virtually and in person with talking rules (13) - Helping a loved gym teacher before school and then answering a planned question from teacher (11)	- Playing Uno virtually with preferred teacher (15) - Meeting school staff before start of the year and sharing something planned with each staff member (15) - Choosing specific planned questions that could be asked in class (14) - Recording presentations to share with teacher (15)

Growing Comfort through 1:1 Opportunities

- Time in the classroom before the school year starts (e.g., fade in with teacher, helping set up classroom)

- Time with teacher before/after school

- Time with teacher during lunch hour/recess

- Flexible groups in classroom so that teacher can have 1:1 time with child

- Stepping out into hallway

- Finding space in room away from peers

- Lunch bunch

- Opportunity to connect outside of school via video

Games with Talking Rules

Any game can be turned into a game with talking rules.

Games can vary in talking expectations:
- Labeling Items (e.g., color, number of moves)
- Answering clear questions in game with specific answers (e.g., blurt, 5-second rule)
- Answering more abstract questions with less clear responses (e.g., whatchamacallit, would you rather)
- Asking questions (e.g., 20 questions, survey of favorites, scavenger hunts)
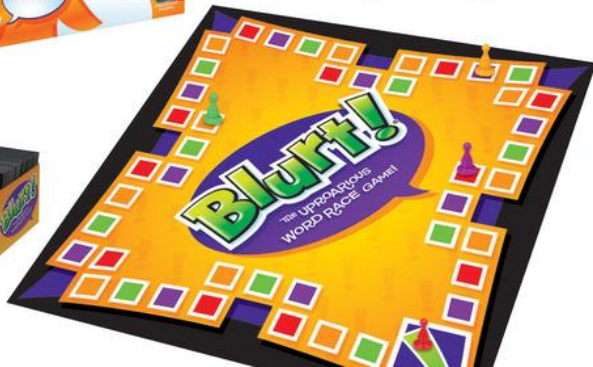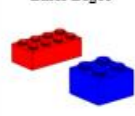
Flexible Grouping

Ideas for Flexible Grouping:

- Pairing child with more comfortable peers/peers that child is verbal with
- Including more flexible group opportunities throughout the day (e.g., paired activities, small groups)
- Paired morning sharing/activity instead of whole class morning meeting
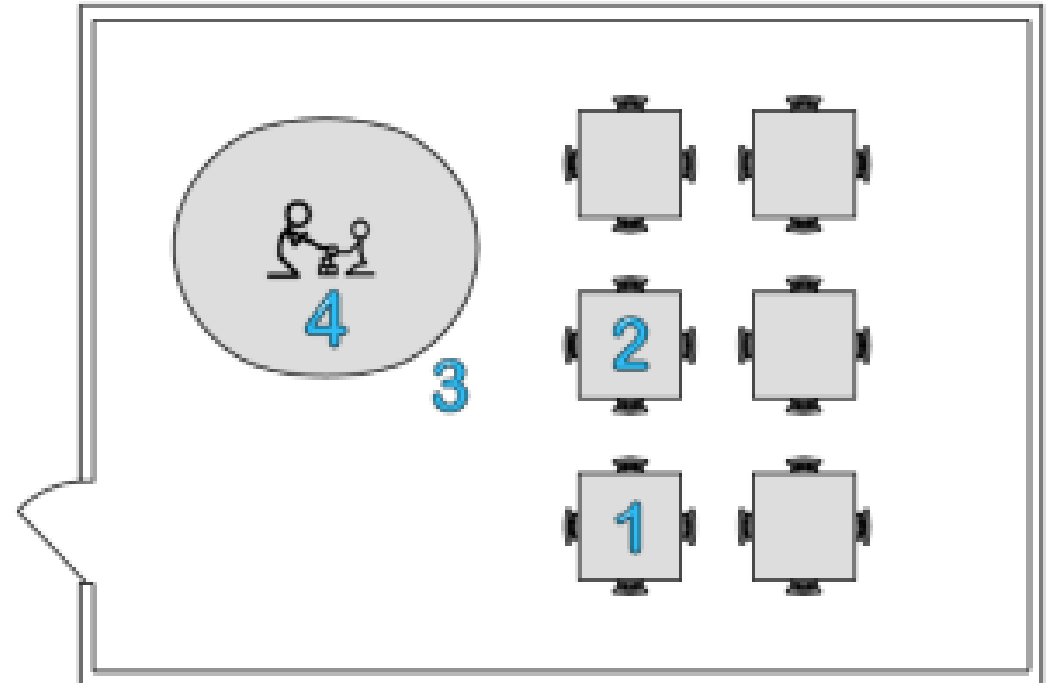- Use of lunch bunch/small group interventions as opportunities for further engagement

Meetings can be shorter (10-15 minutes) that happen more regularly than one long meeting

Fade-In Process

Fade-In Process

1. New individual enters room and completes unrelated tasks as Child and Stimulus for Speech play.

2. New individual moves closer but does not engage.

3. New individual moves closer and provides occasional comments/observations of what the child is doing (e.g., You are making a tower!).

4. New person begins engaging in the activity with the child and stimulus for speech. Questions are forced-choice based on activity being completed.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxs5YonlzSs&t=849s

Cohan, Cahvira & Stein, 2006; Sanetti & Luiselli, 2009; visual from MINT Program Handout

Warm-Up/Fade In Sessions

Warm-Up/Fade-In Sessions:

- Should include a stimulus for speech (e.g., staff child talked with last year, parent, peers that child is verbal with)
- No talking expectations initially (e.g., free play, games)
- Use of forced-choice responses if child does become verbal
- Reinforcement for use of brave words
- Done outside of whole-class instruction (e.g., before school year, mornings before school starts, after school)
- Warm, welcoming, fun

Warm Handoff:

- Used for Children that are continuing in another grade of school
- Steps taken in the end of school-year or during summer before start of new school year

Skills for Fade-In Process

1. Child Directed Interaction (CDI)
   ◦ Used at start of fade-in when child may be nonverbal
   ◦ Time without verbal expectations
   ◦ PRIDE Skills (Praise, Reflect, Imitate, Describe, Enthusiasm)

2. Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI)
   ◦ A period of specific prompting to verbalize
   ◦ Used once a child is displaying increased comfort and engagement in fade-in
   ◦ Prioritizes forced-choice questions (e.g., "Is that Lego green or blue?")

More information on CDI/VDI can be found at Selective Mutism University :Selective Mutism University (thinkific.com)
and SM 101 Webinar: Webinar Selective Mutism 101: Myths, Tips, and Treatment | Selective Mutism Association
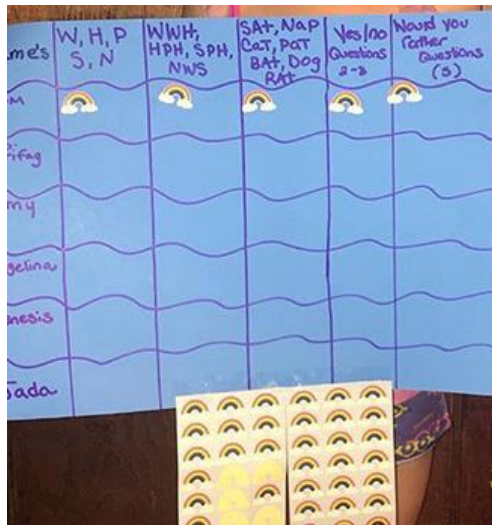
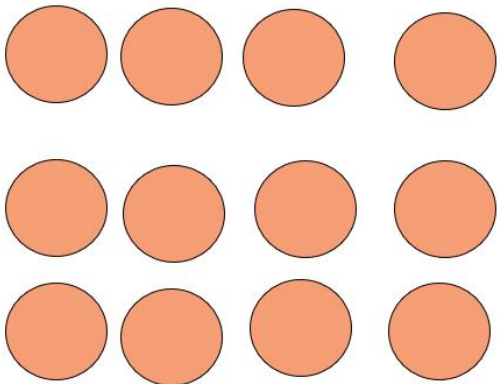# Reinforcement for Brave Talking

Reinforcement Should:
- Emphasizes "Bravery" (e.g., brave acts, brave talking)
- Provided after verbalization
- Used to earn desired items (reinforcement item may depend on age/child interest)

- Reinforcement Should Not:
- Be bribery
- Be too complicated
- Be something that cannot be measured

Clint's Bravery

The Role of Peers

Peer Role in Intervention

If peers are stimulus for speech, find opportunities for:

- Paired peer activities with comfortable peer
- Small group activities gradually incorporating new peers
- Classroom games that allow for verbalization with peers (e.g., Would you rather, BINGO game)
- Lunch Bunches
- Opportunity to record with a peer

Work with peers to avoid the peer speaking for the child or sending message that the child is not capable of verbalizing

Classroom Discussions with Peers

If the child/family consents. Topics to address in whole class communication may include:

1. The child can talk and is working on building their bravery muscles for speaking in school

2. Including the child in class with help them feel more comfortable

3. Do not try to force or pressure the child to speak

4. If the child does speak, do not make a big deal of it

5. It is helpful if peers give the child the opportunity to speak for themselves instead of answering for them

6. Asking choices may help the child feel more comfortable
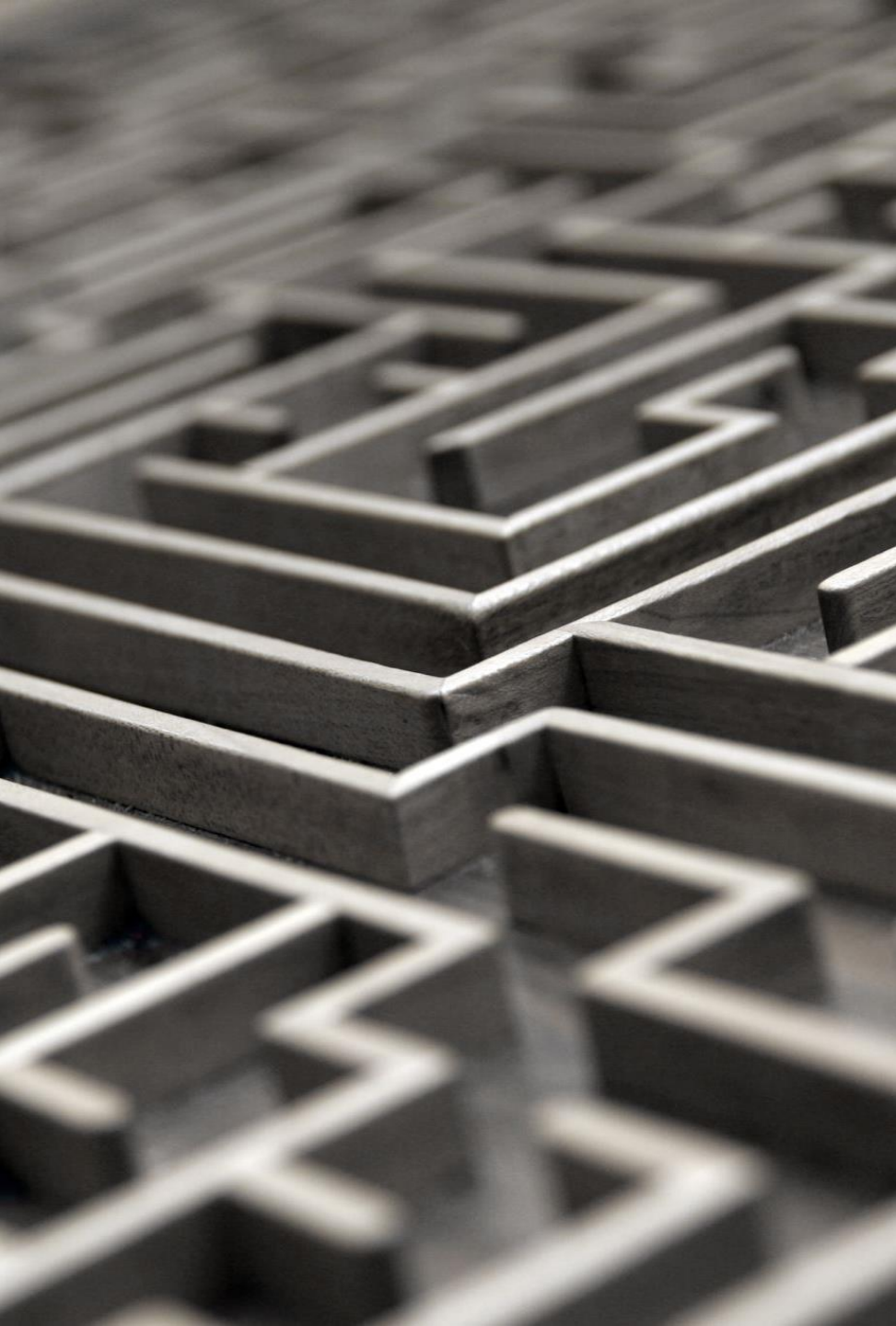
Common Challenges

Knowing when to move forward

- Immediate Treatment Team (with child) identified goals
- Observe child behavior and responses (3-5 successful practices at one level)

Finding time throughout the day

- Individual time with others is critical
- Consider times when individual time can be provided (e.g., before school, lunch, after school, recess, while peers are working independently)
- Flexible grouping for activities

Coordinating between school staff

- Immediate treatment team involved in targeted verbalization goals and remain open in communication
- Other school staff are trained in appropriate interactions and communications
- Team coordinator to ensure communications are quickly and appropriately shared with necessary school staff

Differences in perceptions

- Training in order to better understand a child with SM

Unpredictable comments/actions of peers

- Teaching expectations to peers around appropriate responses
- Not accepting when peers speak for child

IEPs and 504 Plans

Supports through 504 Plan or IEP

- Not all children with SM will require support with 504 Plan or IEP

- Having some form of written plan can be useful to keep everyone on same page

- Section 504 Plan:
  - Requires (1) diagnosed disability (Selective Mutism) and (2) the disability must cause functional impairment in the school setting (impact socially, academically, behaviorally)
  - Emphasis when SM requires greater accommodation/support than what classroom teacher/school staff can offer

- Individualized Education Program (IEP):
  - Classification Areas:
    - Other Health Impairment (OHI)
    - Emotional Behavior Disability (EBD)
    - Speech/Language Impairment (SM can be a rule out for SLP services in some states)

Additional Resources

- Selective Mutism Association Educator's Toolkit: SMA_Educator_ToolKit.pdf (selectivemutism.org)

- Websites:
  - selectivemutism.org
  - anxietybc.com
  - asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Selective-Mutism
  - childmind.org/guide/selective-mutism
  - selectivemutismcenter.org
  - selectivemutismlearning.org

Resources Continued

Books for Teachers/Parents of Youth with Selective Mutism:

- Kearney, C. (2010). Helping children with selective mutism and their parents: A guide for school-based professionals. Oxford University Press.

- Kervatt, G. G. (1999). The silence within: A teacher/parent guide to helping selectively mute and shy children.

- Kotrba, A. (2014). Selective mutism: An assessment and intervention guide for therapists, educators & parents. PESI Publishing & Media.

- Perednik, R. (2011). The selective mutism treatment guide: Manuals for parents, teachers, and therapists: Still waters run deep. Oaklands.

- Shipon-Blum, E. (2007). The ideal classroom setting for the selectively mute child: A guide for parents, teachers and treatment professionals 'understanding the selectively mute child'. 2nd Ed. Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center Publishing.

- Wintgens, A., & Johnson, M. (2012). Can I tell you about selective mutism?: A guide for friends, family and professionals. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Schum, Schum, R. L. (2017). Finding voice: Treating selective mutism and social anxiety. Chicago, IL: Research.

Resources Continued

Helpful Books to use in the Classroom:

- Bos, E. (2013). A spot of blue. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Cheng, W. (2013). Maya's voice. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Longo, S. (2006). My friend Daniel doesn't talk. Speechmark Publishing.
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Questions

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