



# Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center

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

### **ADVICE:**

Contact your child's school:

- Ø Educate them to SM and be sure that they UNDERSTAND Selective Mutism. Since the majority of school personnel do NOT understand SM, you will need to be your child's best advocate. The SMG~CAN has many informational handouts to help educate teachers and school personnel.
- Ø Be sure to be involved in the choice of teachers for your child. Be sure to let the school know that your child needs a nurturing, gentle, calm and understanding teacher who is willing to go the 'extra-step' for your child
- Ø Speak to relevant school personnel about necessary 'accommodations' that need to be in place for your child (this depends on your child's degree of anxiety) - preparing ASAP will allow for time to discuss and organize a well thought-out educational plan and to determine if your child needs an IEP, 504 plan

### **Determine:**

- Ø Who your child's teacher will be (as above)
- Ø Name of some children who will be in your child's class
- Ø The location of your child's classroom

Many schools are reluctant to give out the above information. And you may not be able to determine the information before a few weeks before school, but making an appt with the principal or other relevant school personnel to explain the importance of knowing the above will certainly help more than if you did not approach the topic.

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

Ø Call parents of children whom your child will be in school with. Arrange play dates. If your child is starting a new school, such as the start of Kindergarten, calling parents and suggesting that it will help both children to KNOW someone prior to the beginning of school is often all that needs to be told to another parent.

They too want their child comfortable! Encourage the child to come to your home, or to meet somewhere. 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...increase that comfort...and when comfort is established.

Ø Introduce another child...hopefully; before summer is out, your child will have met quite a few children who will be in their class!!

Ø Spend time on the school grounds, such as the fields or 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 Bring friends to the playground and playing fields! Perhaps some of your play dates with new children can eventually take place on the school grounds!

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. DO not TELL your child that they need to speak. Just talk to them while in the school. Since others are not around, your child will most likely begin speaking to you very soon. GOAL: For your child to see himself/herself as a speaker 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.

Ø Many of our SM children/teens have **eating** and **bathroom** issues. Spending time working on this during the summer will help your child tremendously when the year begins.

For the younger SM children, some starting suggestions would be:

- Spend time 'going to the bathroom' and praising their efforts and attempts. If they need you in the bathroom, then fine. But 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! As the child gets older, being upfront and to the point is important. Meeting the teacher WITHOUT others around is good idea. Some 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.

**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.

**Question:** Are many of the above tactics and suggestions enabling our children's anxiety and mutism?

**Answer:** ABSOLUTELY NOT!!

It is one-step back, two-steps forward instead of one-step forward, two-back!

Goals are to find as many ways as possible to relieve heightened anxiety.

**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.**