Selective Mutism

What is Selective Mutism?

Selective Mutism (SM) is characterized by a persistent failure to speak in one or more social situations for at least 1 month. Children usually develop SM before the age of 5, however it may not be diagnosed until school-age when the disturbance becomes more noticeable and interfering. Children with selective mutism are usually able to speak comfortably at home and with their immediate family. But in less familiar settings or when with unfamiliar people, children may refuse to speak or feel unable to speak. SM is considered to be an anxiety disorder. Children with SM may also be excessively shy, show significant social anxiety or fear of embarrassment, and may at times prefer to be isolated and withdrawn. Children with SM may communicate using the following nonverbal behavior around less familiar people:

Gesturing

Nodding or shaking their head

Pulling or pushing

Using only short (often inaudible) phrases

Whispering

Selective mutism can be associated with considerable life impairment, reduced quality of life, and interference with family, school, and peer functioning.

For more information, contact the MINT program at 305.348.7836 or TheMintProgram@gmail.com

HOW CAN I HELP?

Warm up

A child with SM may feel anxious around a new person. Warm up with the child using the following skills:

- **Praise (Labeled)**

Praise the child for any pro-social behavior, such as eye contact. Praise the child for any other positive behaviors. Label your praises by attaching a behavior to it. Examples of labeled praises are "Great job coloring in the lines, I love how you are staying here and playing with me, and great job using your brave voice!"

- **Reflect**

If the child speaks or makes sounds in front of or to you at any point, repeat or paraphrase what the child says.

- **Describe**

Describe what the child is doing in the moment. An example of a description is "you are choosing the red crayon now." This will show that you are interested in what he/she is doing and allow the child to lead the play or interaction.
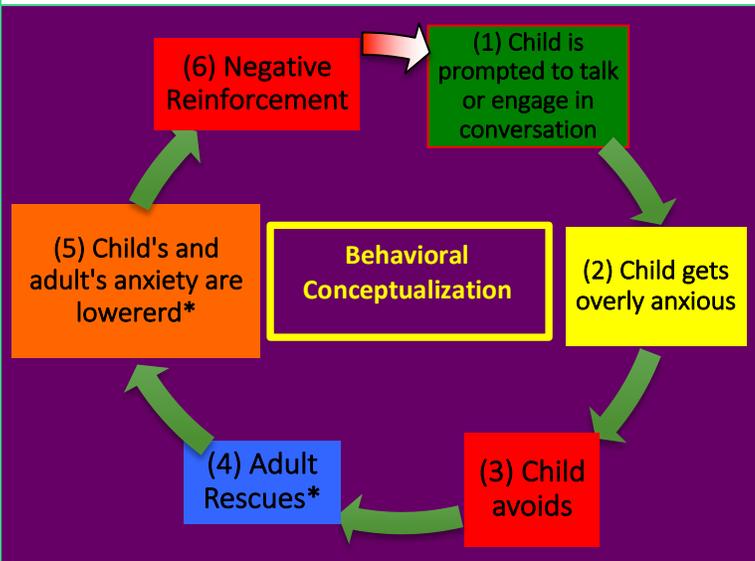
Questions

Avoid asking a child with SM questions while warming up. When it is time to ask a question, use a forced-choice or open-ended question. Allow them 5-10 seconds to answer the question and praise them if/when the child does answer. If the child uses a non-verbal behavior to answer, do not interpret it, instead describe it and prompt for a verbal response.

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Behavioral Conceptualization of Selective Mutism

Selective Mutism: Cycle of Negative Reinforcement

(6) Negative Reinforcement

(1) Child is prompted to talk or engage in conversation

(2) Child gets overly anxious

(3) Child avoids

(4) Adult Rescues*

(5) Child's and adult's anxiety are lowererd*

Behavioral Conceptualization

Kurtz, 2010, Personal Communication

Selective mutism is a form of social anxiety that may have resulted from a long series of negatively reinforced interactions. Negative reinforcement is when a behavior increases due to the subtraction of an aversive stimulus. So, when the anxiety of speaking is taken away due to an adult rescuing the child from the expectation to speak (e.g., answering for the child), the child's non-verbal behavior is reinforced. The cycle of negative reinforcement for selective mutism begins with (1) a child being prompted to talk or engage in conversation at which point the child may become (2) overly anxious and (3) try to avoid speaking. What may happen at this point is that an adult may come in and (4) rescue the child by answering for them. In turn, (5) the child's and adult's anxiety are lowered because the expectation for the child to speak is removed. The child makes the connection that avoiding speech will lead to being rescued from the expectation to speak thus (6) negatively reinforcing their avoidant behavior. The more times that this cycle repeats itself the more reinforced the child is to not speak.

Brave Talking: Cycle of Positive Reinforcement

(6) Positive reinforcement for brave talking

(1) Child is prompted to talk or engage in conversation

(2) Child becomes overly anxious

(3) Child tries to avoid

(4) Adult gives the child the opportunity to respond. Adult shapes verbal behavior.

(5) Child answers question and is rewarded with a labeled-praise
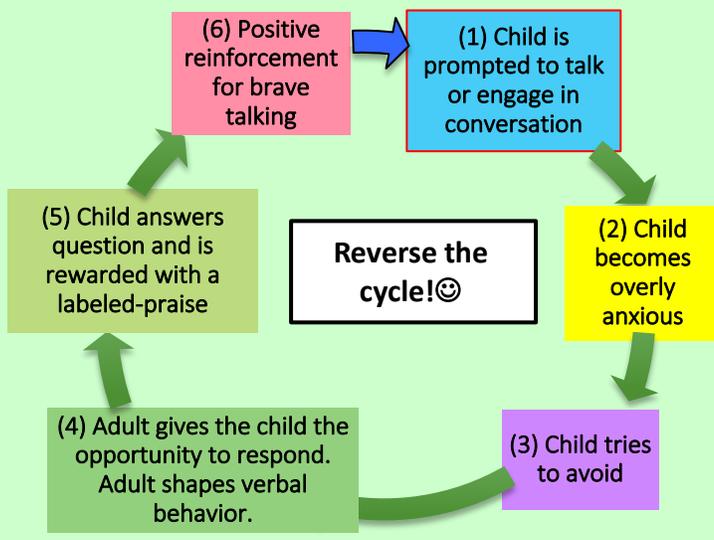
Reverse the cycle!☺

Reverse the cycle. Here is a new cycle of positive reinforcement for brave talking. The cycle of positive reinforcement for brave talking begins with (1) a child being prompted to talk or engage in conversation at which point the child may become (2) overly anxious and (3) try to avoid speaking. To break the cycle of negative reinforcement for not talking the parent would (4) not rescue the child by answering for them BUT would rather give the child the opportunity to speak. This typically consists of waiting 5-10 seconds for the child to answer and letting the child be asked the question for up to three times. If the child still does not answer the parent can shape the verbal behavior toward the person asking the child the question. In turn, (5) the child answers the question and is rewarded with a labeled-praise. The child makes the connection that speaking will lead to being rewarded, thus speaking behavior is (6) positively reinforced. Overtime, with continued exposure to and practice of brave talking, the child's anxiety toward speaking will be lowered.

Child Directed Interaction (CDI)

Child Directed Interaction (CDI) skills are used for warm up with the child so that they feel less anxious around a new person. However, these are great skills to use with the child all the time!

Skill	Reason	Examples
Labeled Praise A positive statement about what the child doing in the moment *Tell your child exactly what you like*	• Increases the behavior that is praised • Shows approval • Improves child's self-esteem • Makes child feel good	Great job using your voice to answer my question! I love that you looked at me while you told me that.
Reflection A statement that repeats back to the child their verbalization or paraphrases what the child says *Avoid "tip-ups" in tone of voice*	• Shows interest • Demonstrates acceptance and understanding • Improves child's speech • Increases verbal communication	Child: I'm hungry Parent: You said you are hungry! Child: Where is the bathroom? Parent: You want to know where the bathroom is.
Behavioral Description A statement about the child's moment-by-moment behavior *Pretend you are a sportscaster!*	• Lets child lead the play • Shows interest • Teaches concepts • Models good speech and vocabulary	I see you shaking your head. You are coloring a flower with the red crayon. I see you smiling.

CDI Rules
- Allow child to lead the play
- Avoid commands and questions
- Do not criticize child or use negative talk
- Ignore minor misbehavior (catch first positive behavior)
- Do not interpret but rather describe behavior
- Be enthusiastic and enjoy your time with the child!

Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI)

Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI) skills are used to increase child speech by asking certain types of questions. Particular formats of how to ask these questions are used.

Type of Question	When to Use	Examples
Forced Choice A question in which two or more possible responses are given within the question	• Good when starting out • They provide the child the answer within the question, making it easier for the child to respond	• Is *pink* or *blue* your favorite color? • Would you rather play on the *swings*, the *slide*, or *you don't know*? • Do you want to see the movie *Frozen* or *another movie*? • Did you brush your teeth: *yes* or *no*?
Open-Ended A question in which a possible answer is not suggested within the question. *Typically starts with "who," "what," "where," "when," "why," or "how"*	• Provide the child the opportunity to express their thoughts more than other types of questions • Allow the child to produce a response on their own	• Who is your best friend? • What did you learn today at school? • Where did you go over the winter break? • Why do you like cookies more than ice cream?
Yes or No A question in which a possible or expected response is either "yes" or "no"	• These questions should be *avoided* • A simple way to change a question from a yes or no question to a forced choice question is by including *yes* or *no* within the question	• Do you like seafood? **Instead:** Do you like seafood, *yes* or *no*? • Did you do your homework? **Instead:** Did you *do your homework* or *not yet*? • Did you make it yourself? **Instead:** Did you *make it yourself* or did *someone help you*?

Asking Questions

Start with an open-ended question
- "What flavor of ice cream would you like?"

If your child doesn't respond, rephrase the question as a forced choice question
- "Would you like chocolate or vanilla ice cream?

Always wait 5 seconds for your child to respond before asking another question
- This will give your child time to process the question and respond

If your child responds with a gesture (i.e., shaking head, pointing), describe the behavior but do not interpret it's meaning
- "I see that you're pointing with your finger. I need you to tell me with your voice if you would like chocolate or vanilla ice cream

When your child does respond verbally, reinforce the verbal response
- Reflect what your child said by repeating his/her answer back to him/her: "You would like vanilla ice cream!"
- Praise the child's talking: "You want vanilla ice cream, great brave talking!"

Rules of VDI

- Avoid yes/no questions (instead, *change to forced-choice questions*)
- Wait 5-10 seconds for the child to answer
- *Describe* any non-verbal behavior instead of interpreting it
- Repeat the question up to *3 times*
- If the child struggles to respond, *practice* in a separate space
- If the child still struggles to respond, return to the last situation they were successful in answering a question
- Revisit the question later if necessary, *never leave a question unanswered*
- If the child only whispers to an individual while in a group setting, the individual should *reflect aloud* to others what child said
- Always use CDI skills (during CDI and VDI phases)

Selective Mutism Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI) Sequences

Rule: Prompts for louder or full voice should only be used if child is ready to move to that higher step.

When child answers right away:
- Adult: "Would you like to use crayons or markers to draw?" (forced-choice)
- Wait!
    - 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: "Markers."
- Adult: "Markers!" (reflection) Great job telling me what you wanted to use!"

When child has difficulty choosing:
- Adult: "Do you want chocolate or vanilla ice cream?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: No response.
- Adult: "Chocolate or vanilla?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: No response.
- Adult: "Do you want chocolate, yes or no?" (forced-choice)
- Child: Nods head.
- Adult: "I see you nodding. Is that a yes or a no?" (forced-choice)
- Child: "…yes"
- Adult: "Yes, you want chocolate." (reflection) Good job telling me what you want!"

When child answers with a nonverbal response:
- Adult: "Would you like to use crayons or markers to draw?" (forced-choice)
- Child: Immediately points to markers.
- Adult: "I see you pointing." (description) "Does that mean you want the markers or crayons?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: "I want the markers."
- Adult: "You want the markers!" (reflection) "Super job telling me what you wanted using your words!" (labeled praise)

When child answers with a barely audible response:
- Adult: "Do you want to watch Cinderella or Frozen?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: Under breath "F..o..z.n."
- Adult: "I hear you trying to answer." (describing) "I couldn't hear you. Say it again a little louder." (direct command)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: "Frozen!"
- Adult: "You want to watch Frozen!" (reflection) I love that you told me that with a loud voice!" (labeled praise)

When child answers in a whisper:
- Adult: "Do you want to eat your sandwich or your pretzels first?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: Whispers "sandwich."
- Adult: "I hear you whispering. (description) "Tell me what you want with your full voice." (direct command)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: "Sandwich." (full voice)
- Adult: "You want to eat your sandwich first!" (reflection) "Great Job using your full voice to tell me!" (labeled praise)

When child doesn't respond at all:
- Adult: "Would you like cookies or crackers as a snack?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: No Response
- Adult: "Crackers or cookies?" (forced-choice)
- Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
- Child: No Response
- Adult: "Do you want cookies for snack, yes or no?" (forced-choice)
- Child: No response
- Adult: "It might be hard to answer in front of all of these people, let's go practice in the hallway." **OR** "That might be hard to answer right now, think about it and I will come back and ask you in a little bit." **OR** "Go practice with mom and then come back and tell me."