

Continuing Selective Mutism Exposures During a Pandemic

Whether you're just starting or maintaining gains made, working on Selective Mutism (SM) at home involves continued practice with speaking exposures with other people. Given the recent pandemic, you may feel unsure how you can safely continue to set up exposures for your child if they are unable to practice face to face. This handout gives you some ideas.

Ideas for “virtual” or “distance” speaking exposures

Technology is our friend and can be a good venue for continued brave talking practice. Sometimes these calls are daunting because the social interaction is in a big spotlight. However, you can set goals around several variables depending on what is easier or harder for your child (for example, volume of speech, where your child looks, whether parents are present, whether anyone else is present, what the activity is, if the camera is on or off).

Here are some ideas to help:

- Contact parents from school or social groups to see if you can use a videoconference platform to practice brave talking together. You can set it up pretty similarly to what you would do in person with classmates/teachers(s).
 - Some videoconference platforms (like Houseparty) have games built in that can prompt brave talking.
- For presentations or reading aloud—gather some extended family members and friends online for your child to read/speak to.
 - If this is hard for your child, you can read together and tradeoff who is reading, gradually increasing the number of words your child reads aloud.
- Have your child call, video message, or Facetime a child in class for help with a task for school.
- Record short videos and send to family and friends via apps such as Marco Polo.
 - Telling jokes or sending trivia questions back and forth to try to stump family members or teachers can be fun!
- If you are ordering take-out, allow your child to help place the order.
- Have your child play board games, particularly those requiring talking (like “Guess Who”, “Go Fish”, “Headbantz”, “Sorry”) using a videochat platform. There are some games you can play cooperatively online and you can go low-tech and set up the board game on each person’s side of the call!

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To Learn More

- Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine Support and Crisis Services
- 206-987-2164, option 4
- seattlechildrens.org
- A free webinar provided through the Selective Mutism Association: selectivemutism.org/managing-anxiety-in-the-face-of-covid-19

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



As you do brave talking practice, remember to:

- Set goals for each exposure episode with your child and make sure these goals are SMART
 - SMART: Smart, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely
- Continue to praise and reward your child's brave talking behaviors!
- Provide as many brave talking opportunities as you can, acknowledging that you are balancing many goals right now.
 - If it feels daunting, think consistency. Pick at least one time per day or one consistent opportunity that tends to come up to regularly practice brave talking, even if it is brief.

Feelings are normal

It's important to remember during this period of change and uncertainty that:

- It's important for parents and caregivers to manage their own anxiety. Children feel more secure when their parents show calm in stressful times, so taking care of yourself is important to your child's well-being.
- Some kids may express scared feelings. Listen to them with understanding, while also providing support.
 - Leave space and time for them to voice their thoughts. This will allow you to correct misunderstandings while avoiding providing excessive reassurance.
- It's **KEY** to keep normal routines as much as possible, including sleep, eating, bedtimes, and educational times. This creates a sense of stability and predictability.
- Remember that while all feelings are ok, not all behaviors are. Some youth may display more problematic or disruptive behavior at times of change. Reach out if you need support in managing these behaviors. Here are some key tips:
 - Catch your child being good
 - Praise them for the behavior you want to see when you see it, even if it is brief.
 - Reward them for meeting behavioral goals.
 - Take breaks to center yourself before you respond if needed.