



Selective Mutism Anxiety Research & Treatment Center

“HANDOVER/TAKEOVER (HO/TO)”

For the child/teen with Selective Mutism

Stimulating social engagement:

The precursor to social communication!

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The KEY to becoming a *confident social communicator* is acquiring and securing the first critical step of social engagement.

What is social engagement? Quite simply, it is interacting, acknowledging and reacting to another person.

Surprisingly, MANY individuals who suffer with selective mutism LACK simple engagement skills.

In relation to the SOCIAL COMMUNICATION BRIDGE, these individuals are noncommunicative or minimally communicative with others.

For most children/teens with SM, lack of social engagement skills are not due to LACK of ability, but due to initial feelings of anxiety/fear and resultant avoidant behaviors. Typically, lack of opportunity as well as learned, conditioned and enabled behaviors exist.

The child’s difficulty with social engagement often starts from birth.

The majority of children with SM have an innately timid temperament. Some may have difficulty with processing sensory stimuli, have an expressive language difficulty, are bilingual and/or perhaps had little exposure to social encounters. etc... Some children have a combination of MANY reasons for feeling anxious and fearful in a social situation.

Therefore, although the etiology of ‘fear’ may differ among children with SM, they react similarly from a neurobiological standpoint.

The physiological mechanism of ‘fear’ causes the child to FREEZE. The child therefore ‘SHUTS DOWN’ and immobilization occurs. Defensive behaviors

develop. Muscle stiffness occurs causing the child to look visibly uncomfortable, manifest a flat affect, avert gaze and develop mute behavior.

The child's neurological system develops or perceives the social environment where he/she senses an expectation for speech/communication as unsafe or threatening; hence the term, NEUROCEPTION, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges from Univ. of Illinois; Chicago)

The child's resultant defensive behavior causes him/her to **DISENGAGE from social interaction and communication.**

Some parents misunderstand the child's avoidance and TRY very hard to get the child to interact and TALK. This only causes the child to feel MORE anxious and avoidant since the expectation is far greater than what the child can comfortably accomplish. Anxiety heightens.

Then, parents learn that their child may have an anxiety disorder and manifest the 'OH MY GOSH' phenomenon. Parents take an almost opposite approach. They now OVERLY protect the child to minimize fear.

Parents will 'buffer' the child by holding him/her close, do the speaking and interacting for the child, etc. etc.

AS a result, social interaction and simple engagement opportunities as well as expectations are actually MINIMIZED.

Even as the child ages and perhaps the initial underlying reasons for WHY the child felt anxious are minimized or perhaps not even an etiology any longer, 'parental protection behavior' or 'social buffering' may continue only reinforcing the child's social engagement avoidance.

In other words,

The social communication pathway (system!) becomes 'dusty and develops cobwebs' from underuse!

The more the 'system' is not used, the more sensitive the 'system' becomes!

Even mild expectations can elicit fear and avoidant behaviors.

Parents then protect even more...and a viscous cycle occurs...leading to

lack of social engagement and conditioned noncommunicative or minimally communicative behaviors!

Yet ironically, many 'try' to get a child to verbalize even when the child is not even engaging! It is NO wonder why a child with SM may develop even MORE fear and reinforced avoidance due to unrealistic expectations!

Social engagement activities and strategies were developed as part of Social Communication Anxiety Treatment or SCAT for individuals who need to build engagement skills as a prerequisite to nonverbal and eventually verbal communication.

In order for 'engagement strategies' to be effective, parents need to unlearn their conditioned '*social buffering*.'

Ways parents can unlearn social buffering is to:

(1) Encourage the child to be on the FRONT line of interaction.

Rather than SHADOWING their parent, the child should be next to or in front of the parent. *Ideally, the smaller, quieter and less crowded the environment, the easier for the child.

(2) Think: '*Band-aid over mouth and hands in pocket*'

This mantra helps parents step aside to encourage their child's involvement.

(3) *EXPOSE, EXPOSE and EXPOSE!*

The more social opportunities the better!

As parents do the above, encouraging the child to HAND items to others and TAKE items from others.

Hence, HANDOVER/TAKEOVER (HOTO)!

For younger children, we may encourage the Handover/Takeover GAME.

A creative approach is:

Mrs. Handover or Mrs. Takeover / Mr. Handover or Mr. Takeover

For older children/teens, I recommend a more active approach or the GOAL of HANDOVER/TAKEOVER (HO/TO)

A positive reinforcement chart to keep track of HO/TO efforts often helps with unlearning behavior.

Therefore, the way to help the child develop the necessary stage of social

engagement is to begin encouraging interaction in a gentle and approachable fashion! Handover/Takeover (HO/TO) is an ideal strategy for this!

Implementation of engagement strategies not only help parents unlearn conditioned 'social buffering' but the strategies desensitize the child to more comfortable interaction.... which fuels the progression into confident nonverbal and eventually verbal communication!

Reference: Stephen W. Porges. Univ. of Illinois at Chicago..NEUROCEPTION: *A Subconscious System for Detecting Threats and Safety.*



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