



## The Child/Teen with Selective Mutism in the Real World

Dr. Elisa Shipon-Blum :)

President & Director Selective Mutism Anxiety & Related Disorders Treatment Center (SMart Center)

Director Selective Mutism Research Institute (SMRI)

Founder Selective Mutism Association (SMA)

Creator of CommuniCamp™ (Intensive Group Treatment for SM)

Clinical Asst. Professor Family Medicine and Psychology PCOM

---

### **Encouraging Social Communication in Public Places:**

Interacting and communicating to strangers and less familiar individuals is difficult for children or teens with Selective Mutism (SM). Typically, a child with SM will chat away with his or her parent, but will shut down, turn away, and/or avoid eye contact if someone approaches and tries to ask a question or interact with him or her. With time, this child will begin to make more eye contact and may communicate nonverbally or whisper to parents to indicate his/her needs. Some children with SM will be more communicative while others will be less engaging and communicative.

The key is to know how the child feels and interacts in the real world. An understanding of the child's baseline stage on the [Social Communication Bridge®](#) will help parents to encourage more communication and bridging up in less overwhelming settings, while bridging down when more overwhelming settings. (Learn more about [S-CAT®](#), the evidenced-based Social Communication Anxiety Treatment® for Selective Mutism.)

### **Ways to help your child feel more comfortable in public places:**

- Arrive to places early. Entering a room full of people is difficult for most people, and it is that much harder for our SM children. For example, when attending a party, arrive at least 15 minutes early so your child can get acclimated to the room before most other guests arrive.
- Include your child's friend(s) in as many social outings, parties, and trips to the mall, market, etc. as possible. Friends are great distractions for our children.
- Try to limit after-school activities to small groups with people your child knows. Activities should be at school or another familiar place.
- Do not switch activities repeatedly. Stick with one activity for as long as possible for your child to build comfort. SM children need more time to warm up and build comfort.
- Avoiding a lot of changes, maintain consistency.
- Prepare your child well in advance for changes in his or her routine or activities. With new endeavors, the recommendation is to include friends as much as possible.
- When planning activities, be sure to include a close friend, e.g. send your child with a friend to dance class. This will help him or her start out more comfortable right from the beginning.
- Try to go to the same markets and stores to allow your child to be at the same place. Frequently seeing the same store clerks often is comforting.
- Pick smaller markets and stores, and avoid large and crowded public places.
- If you need to go to large places, prepare your child and arrive early or during off times to avoid a lot of crowds.

### **Common Social Outings and Ways to Combat the Jitters**

First and foremost, prepare your child well in advance of any social outing. Most SM kids dread parties and social gatherings like the plague so adequate preparation is key.

### Parties:

If the party is being held in a location that is big and loud, you might visit the location a day or two before the event. On the day of, arrive early, bring a friend, and stay close until your child seems relaxed. For many SM kids, it takes almost the entire length of the party to feel comfortable. That is why preparing ahead can only help.

### Social Gatherings with Friends and Family:

Relatives and close family friends are usually the most difficult for our kids because they want to be the one who your child speaks to first. Most are sure they can get your child to speak to them. As a result, they do whatever they can (tickle, threaten, bribe, push, probe and tease) to get the child to talk. Most relatives will enter the room and immediately ask the SM child if they are going to speak to them today! Certain close family friends and relatives are usually the last people (along with teachers) that the SM child speaks too. Why? These individuals usually have the greatest expectation on our kids. **So, what can parents do to help make social gatherings easier for our anxious children?**

- Educate your relatives about Selective Mutism.
  - Further recommendations are to talk with relatives and friends and let them know that your child has SM and needs more time, than the average person, to get comfortable with environments and other people.
  - Share [What is Selective Mutism?](#), an informational handout on Selective Mutism.
  - Create an [About My Child](#) document to share with relatives and friends to explain:
    - They should not try to make your child speak. Less expectation is better.
    - When they see your child, they should not run up to him/her immediately.
    - Avoid initial attention on your child. Say hello and acknowledge everyone in the room without any focus on your child.
    - Avoid eye contact in the beginning.
    - Get down on your child's level and try to identify with his/her likes and interests.
    - Joke and have fun, but apply no pressure to speak.
    - Do not try to be the one who gets your child to speak. Efforts to get your child to speak have never worked in the past, will never work in the future, and do not work now.
- Prepare your child.
  - For social gatherings at your home, have guests arrive a bit scattered from the other (having everyone arrive at once is too overwhelming for most SM children). When attending social gatherings outside of your home, arrive early!
  - Prepare your child in advance for the outing. Perhaps go through the photo album and show your child the people who will be attending the gathering.
  - Allow your child to have a friend present at the social outing for added comfort.
  - If you are having the party, include your child in as much of the planning as possible. This creates a feeling of control by knowing exactly what is going to happen and when.
  - Let your child know that you understand that social gatherings are tough for him/her and that you will do whatever you can to help them feel more comfortable. Some lap holding or hand holding in the beginning may help.
  - Ask your child what will make him/her feel more comfortable during the party. Letting him/her figure out ways to improve comfort is key for our children.

**Increased comfort → Less anxiety → Verbalization**

