Understanding & Treating Selective Mutism (SM) in Teens

Anxiety

Anxiety is a **natural and adaptive** emotion that almost everyone experiences. Anxiety serves an important survival function, by alerting us to respond to signs of danger. Imagine you never felt anxious and, thus, never responded with caution: would you go to work? Pay the bills? Stop at red lights?

Although anxiety is typically mild and transitory, some anxiety systems are **over-sensitive**, leading to **excessive**, **persistent** feelings of anxiety that can cause **psychological distress**. The goal of anxiety treatment is not to turn off the "anxiety alarm," but to increase its threshold for going off.

Anxiety can be activated, maintained, and, importantly, targeted by the environment (e.g., the way a parent or teacher responds to a child's anxious behavior) through:

- **Accommodating or providing attention to avoidance behaviors**
- **Reinforcing "brave" (i.e., approach) behaviors**

The cycle of negative reinforcement (page 2) shows how anxiety is increased over time through the removal of an aversive stimulus.

The cycle of positive reinforcement (page 2) illustrates how anxiety can be reduced over time through consistent exposure to and reward for approaching anxiety-provoking situations.

SM

SM is an **anxiety disorder** 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, but it may not be diagnosed until school-age, when the disturbance becomes more noticeable and/or interfering. In addition, while SM is typically associated with young children, teens can also suffer from SM.

Children and teens with SM are usually able to speak comfortably at home and with their immediate families; **in less familiar settings or with unfamiliar people**, **however, they may refuse or feel unable to speak**.

Older children, who often have a longer history with SM, are also more likely to be **excessively shy**, **show significant social anxiety** or **fear of embarrassment**, and may at times prefer to be **isolated and/or withdrawn**. They also may be more effective at communicating through **nonverbal behaviors**, such as:

- **Nodding or shaking head**
- **Pointing or gesturing**
- **Inaudible, whispered, or abbreviated speech**

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

FIU Center for Children and Families

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Behavioral Conceptualization of SM

Cycle of Negative Reinforcement

SM behaviors may result from a long series of **negatively reinforced interactions**. Negative reinforcement is when a behavior increases due to the removal of an unwanted feeling/behavior. **When the anxiety of speaking is taken away due to an adult rescuing the teen from the expectation to speak, the teen's nonverbal behavior is reinforced**.
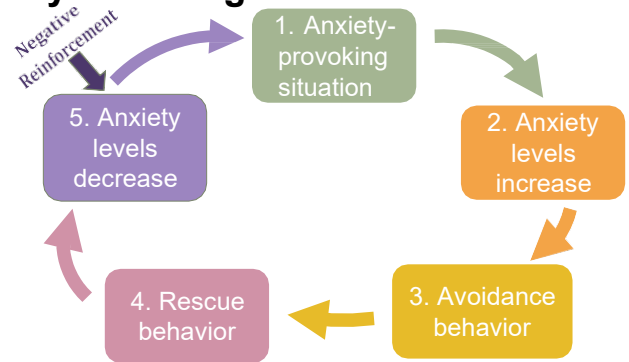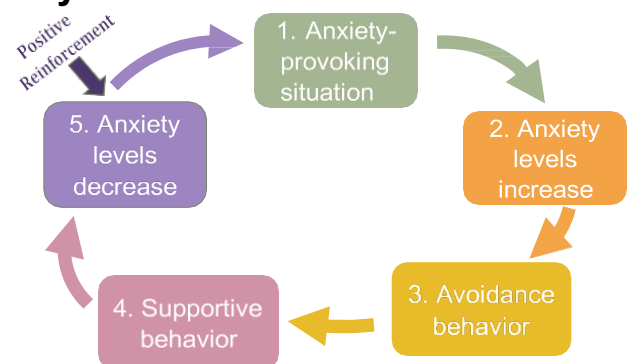
The cycle of negative reinforcement for SM proceeds as follows:

1. **Anxiety-provoking situation**: the teen is prompted to speak
2. **Anxiety levels increase**: the teen becomes overly anxious
3. **Avoidance behavior**: the teen tries to avoid speaking by nodding, gesturing, or freezing
4. **Rescue behavior**: another individual (often an adult) "rescues" the teen by removing the expectation to speak (e.g., answering for the teen)
5. **Anxiety levels decrease**: the teen feels less anxious once rescued (for the short term)

As a result, the teen makes the connection that avoidance behaviors are effective coping strategies to use to reduce anxiety levels. The more times this cycle repeats itself, the more reinforced the teen is to avoid speaking. After many years of practicing this avoidance, a child with SM may evolve into a teen who is very adept at communicating nonverbally.

Cycle of Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is when a behavior increases due to the addition of a rewarding stimulus. So, **when the anxiety of speaking is reduced by an adult providing the teen with support to speak, the teen's verbal behavior is reinforced**.

The cycle of positive reinforcement for SM proceeds as follows:

1. **Anxiety-provoking situation**: the teen is prompted to speak
2. **Anxiety levels increase**: the teen becomes overly anxious
   - ✦ the more the teen practices, the less anxious they will get in subsequent exposures
3. **Avoidance behavior**: the teen may try to avoid speaking by nodding, gesturing, or freezing
4. **Supportive behavior**: another individual provides the teen with support to speak by providing an opportunity to speak (e.g., 5-10 seconds), repeated or adjusted prompts, and positive attention (e.g., labeled praise) for verbal behavior
5. **Anxiety levels decrease**: the teen feels less anxious following speech

As a result, the teen makes the connection that speaking leads to rewarding responses and a reduction of anxiety levels. In addition, teens often need to recognize how SM interferes with something that is important to them (e.g., academic performance, peer relationships) in order to increase motivation to change, which is much more likely to happen when others limit their own use of "rescue" behaviors. Over time, with consistent exposure and practice, the teen will become increasingly reinforced to speak.

Child Directed Interaction (CDI) Skills

CDI skills are used during warm up periods with the teen to help them feel less anxious and more successful around new people and in new environments. However, the CDI skills are great to use at all times!

Skill	Reasons	Examples
Labeled Praise: A positive statement about what the teen is doing in the moment. *Tell the teen exactly what you like about what they're doing!*	• Increases the praised behavior • Shows approval • Increases the teen's self-esteem and confidence	Thank you for using your voice to answer my question. I appreciate that you looked at me while you told me that.
Reflection: A statement that repeats back to the teen his or her verbalization or paraphrases what the teen said. *Avoid "tip ups" that turn the reflection into a question!*	• Shows interest in the teen's ideas • Demonstrates acceptance and understanding • Increases verbal communication	Teen: I'm hungry. Adult: You're telling me you're hungry. Teen: Where is the bathroom? Adult: You're asking me where the bathroom is… (provide answer)
Behavioral Description: A statement about the teen's moment-by-moment behavior. *Pretend you are a sportscaster!*	• Allows the teen to lead the activity • Demonstrates enthusiasm and interest • Teaches concepts • Models appropriate speech	You are shuffling the deck of cards. I see you shaking your head. You are drawing a sunset with your color pencils.

CDI Guidelines

★ Follow the teen's lead in the interaction/activity
★ Avoid asking questions and giving commands
★ Avoid (constructive) criticism or any negative appraisals of the teen's behavior
★ Ignore minor misbehavior (and try to "catch" them behaving appropriately as soon as possible afterwards)
★ Describe nonverbal communication without interpreting its meaning (e.g., "I see you're pointing," rather than "I see you're pointing to the chips.")
★ Be enthusiastic and enjoy your time with the teen!

Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI) Skills

VDI skills are used to increase the teen's speech by asking certain types of questions and applying a flexible sequence of prompts to support the teen's success in responding.

Type of Question	Considerations	Examples
Forced Choice: A question in which two or more possible responses are given within the question.	• Helpful during early interactions or in difficult situations • Provides support in selecting a response, making it easier for the teen to answer	Is your favorite color *red* or *blue*? Would you rather *play cards*, *build a Lego set*, or *do you not care*? Do you want to watch something on *Netflix*, *Hulu*, or *somewhere else*?
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"*	• Allows the teen to be more expressive and come up with his or her own response • May be more challenging for teens concerned with being "wrong" or evaluated	Who is your best friend? What did you do at school today? How many siblings do you have? Why do you prefer the pool over the beach?
Yes or No: A question in which a possible or expected response is either "yes or no." *Try to avoid these!*	• Can be answered more easily through nonverbal means (e.g., nodding, shaking head) • Limits responses to just one word • Can be quickly changed into forced choice questions by adding the words "yes or no?" to the end of the question	Do you like seafood? ➔ Do you like seafood, *yes or no*? Did you finish your homework? ➔ Did you finish your homework, *or are you not done yet*? Is the party on *December 5th* ➔ Is the party on *December 5th* or *a different day*?

VDI Guidelines

★ Always wait between 5-10 seconds for the teen to answer
★ Use a reflection + a labeled praise to reinforce verbal responses
★ Avoid yes or no questions
    ★ If/when you ask a yes or no question, change it to a forced choice question right away!
★ Describe nonverbal communication without interpreting its meaning (e.g., "I see you're pointing," rather than "I see you're pointing to the chips.")
★ Repeat the same question up to 3 times
★ If the teen struggles to respond verbally, return to the last situation he or she was successful
★ Always revisit questions that were initially left unanswered
★ Reflect the teen's speech with your brave (i.e., regular volume) voice, even if he or she whispers, especially in group contexts
★ Continue to use CDI skills in between questions

VDI Sequence Examples

When the teen answers right away:
• Adult: "Would you like to play Uno or with regular cards?" (forced choice)
   Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
• Teen: "Uno."
• Adult: "Uno." (reflection) "Thanks for telling me what you want to play." (labeled praise)
	When the teen has difficulty choosing:
	• Adult: "Do you want chocolate or vanilla ice cream?" (forced choice)
	   Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds
	• Teen: No response.
	• Adult: "Chocolate or vanilla?" (forced choice)
	   Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds
	• Teen: No response.
	• Adult: "Do you want chocolate, yes or no?" (forced choice)
	• Teen: Nods head.
	• Adult: "I see you nodding." (behavior description) "Is that a yes or a no?" (forced choice)
	• Teen: "…yes."
	• Adult: "Yes, you want chocolate." (reflection) "Thanks for telling me what you want." (labeled praise)

When the teen answers with a nonverbal response:
• Adult: "Would you like to play Uno or with regular cards?" (forced choice)
• Teen: Immediately points to box of Uno.
• Adult: "I see you pointing." (behavior description) "Does that mean you want to play Uno or with cards? (forced choice)
   Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
• Teen: "I want to play Uno."
• Adult: "You want to play Uno." (reflection) "I appreciate you telling me what you wanted using your words." (labeled praise)
	When the child/teen answers with a barely audible response:
	*Prompts for louder or full voice should only be used if child is ready to move to that higher step.
	• Adult: "Do you want to watch something on Netflix or Hulu?" (forced choice)
	   Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds
	• Teen: Under breath "N.e..f..x."
	• Adult: "I see you are trying to answer." (behavior description) "I couldn't hear you. Tell me again a little louder." (direct command)
	   Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds
	• Teen: "Netflix."
	• Adult: "You want to watch something on Netflix." (reflection) "Thank you for telling me in a loud voice." (labeled praise)

When the teen answers in a whisper:
*Prompts for louder or full voice should only be used if child/teen is ready to move to that higher step.
• Adult: "Do you want to eat a sandwich or a burger for lunch?" (forced choice)
   Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
• Teen: "Sandwich." (whisper)
• Adult: "I hear you whispering." (behavior description) "Tell me what you want with your full voice." (direct command)
   Wait! 1   2   3   4   5 seconds
• Teen: "Sandwich." (full voice)
• Adult: "You want to eat a sandwich." (reflection) "Thank you for using your full voice to tell me." (labeled praise)
	When the teen doesn't respond at all:
	• Adult: "Would you rather go bowling or to the arcade?" (forced choice)
	   Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds
	• Teen: No response.
	• Adult: "Bowling or arcade?" (forced choice)
	• Teen: No response.
	• Adult: "Do you want to go bowling, yes or no?" (forced choice)
	• Teen: 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 (familiar person) and then come back and tell me."

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Earning Rewards

Contingency management systems allow teens to receive rewards for their brave behavior and should be used alongside other positive social and verbal reinforcement methods (e.g., enthusiasm, labeled praise).

In addition to typical tangible rewards (e.g., money, video game credit, food), teens can earn non-material rewards or privileges like extra screen time, a later bedtime or curfew, not having to do a chore, or quality time with friends or parents.

In order to effectively motivate and reinforce the teen, it is important that there is **consistency**, **collaboration**, **predictability**, and **follow through** within the system.
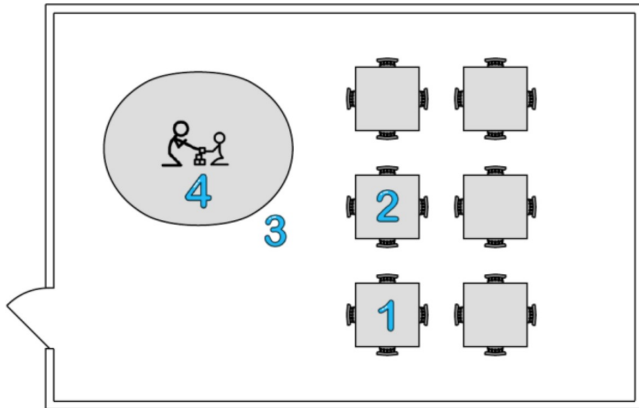- **Consistency**: consistently monitor and label the behavior that will be rewarded
- **Collaboration**: work collaboratively with the teen to develop a (reasonable) list of rewards to ensure their input about what sorts of rewards are meaningful enough for them to work for
- **Predictability**: make sure it is clear to everyone involved how the teen will earn rewards and in what way he or she will be rewarded
- **Follow through**: provide the reward as soon as possible and only if the reward is earned (i.e., when the desired behavior [or agreed upon approximation] is demonstrated)

Charts can be used to monitor and reinforce a teen's brave, approach-oriented behavior. One way these charts are used is that the teen receives a tally or point on his or her chart each time he or she demonstrates a brave behavior (e.g., audible speech). These points or tallies are then exchanged for privileges or rewards from their list.

[Name]'s Chart		
✓	✓	✓
✓		

Note: each time the chart is filled with checks, [name] earns 1 point.
Points (tally):

Rewards: 5-10 points = _____
10 + points = _____

The teen's contingency management system should evolve over time to reflect the teen's progress, such that as the teen demonstrates success meeting his or her goals, rewards are subsequently earned for meeting increasingly challenging goals.

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Fade-Ins

Before beginning the fade-in process:
- Set a goal and an associated reward in collaboration with teen
- Decide on warm-up activities based on the teen's interests
- Ensure the teen is able to consistently verbalize to the familiar person alone

Throughout the fade-in process:
- Use CDI and VDI strategies to facilitate verbal behavior from the teen, providing social and tangible reinforcement (e.g., labeled praises, tallies or points on their chart) in response to all verbalizations.

Steps for the unfamiliar person:

1. Enter the room and engage in a separate task (e.g., paperwork, cellphone)
2. Move closer to the teen, but continue to engage in the separate task
3. Move closer to the teen and begin to occasionally use CDI skills to reinforce the teen's behavior (e.g., "I love how I could hear your voice from over here," "You're building a very cool Lego set with your dad!"
4. Begin to engage in the activity with the teen and familiar person, while continuing to use CDI skills, and ask a forced-choice question to the teen related to his or her activity (e.g., "Is the marker you're using red or blue?")
   - Use VDI skills to facilitate a verbal response; if the teen struggles to respond, the familiar person should use shaping strategies
   - Continue to use CDI, VDI, and reinforcement strategies as the familiar person begins to fade out of the interaction (e.g., providing less attention/support), moving a bit further away from the teen, and eventually leaving the room

Shaping

To support a teen's ability to meet new and/or challenging goals, the teen should be rewarded/reinforced for **successive approximations** toward the desired behavior. A successive approximation takes place during a **series of attempts** at a goal behavior. The process of "**shaping**" the teen's behavior entails providing positive reinforcement to the teen each time his or her successive approximation comes closer to the goal behavior than previous attempts.

Examples of shaping include:
- ★ Repeatedly prompting (**and reinforcing** successful attempts from) the teen to:
  - ★ Answer a new person's questions (e.g., familiar person repeats it, directs answers to the familiar person, even when the new person asks it)
  - ★ Answer the same question as the familiar person gets increasingly closer in proximity to the new person
  - ★ Increase volume
  - ★ "Tell" answers to parts of a person's body (e.g., shoulder, chin, ear) until they make eye contact
  - ★ Saying a larger portion of a fill-in-the-blank or lead-in statement (e.g., the familiar person begins a sentence or question and pauses for the teen to complete it)

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