

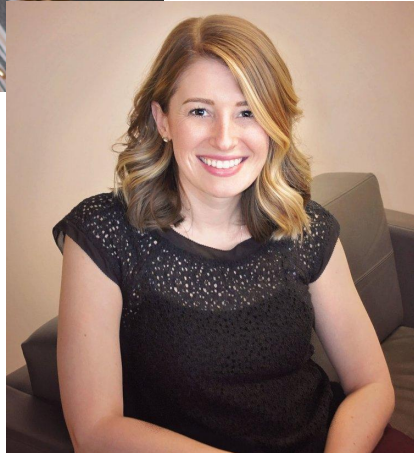
# Modifying Behavior Therapy for Adolescents with Selective Mutism and Social Anxiety

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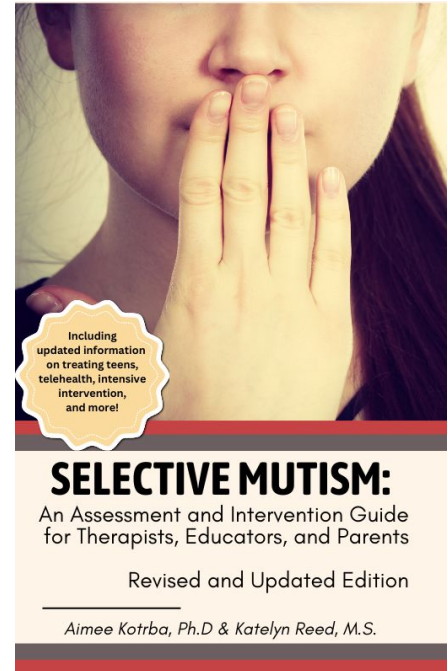
Expert Behavioral Health Services  
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# Introductions and Disclosures



Co-authors of  
Selective Mutism: An  
Assessment and  
Intervention Guide for  
Schools, Therapists,  
and Parents (for  
purchase on Amazon)

No other disclosures.



# Objectives

1. Discuss the development and maintenance of Selective Mutism (SM)
2. Learn how SM specifically impacts teens and young adults
3. Define key assessment tools and strategies
4. List behavioral and supplemental strategies for treating teens with SM



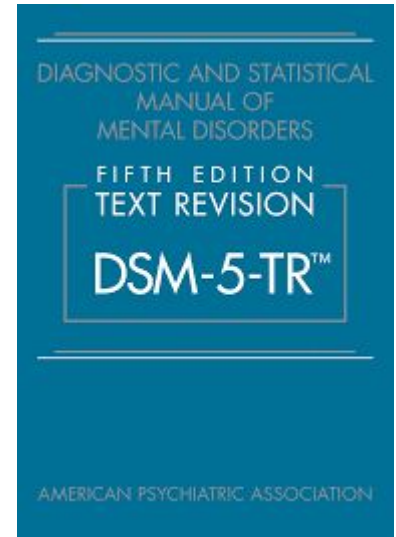
# DSM Criteria

Specific anxiety disorder (best thought of as a specific phobia)

Consistent, ongoing failure to speak in specific social situations, especially school, despite speaking comfortably in other situations

Not due to a primary language disorder

Other disorders (e.g., stuttering, autism) have been ruled out



# Common Misconceptions About SM

“SM is caused by trauma”

“People with SM will ‘grow out of it’”

“They are choosing not to talk”

“If we just reduce their anxiety in a given setting, they will be able to speak openly”



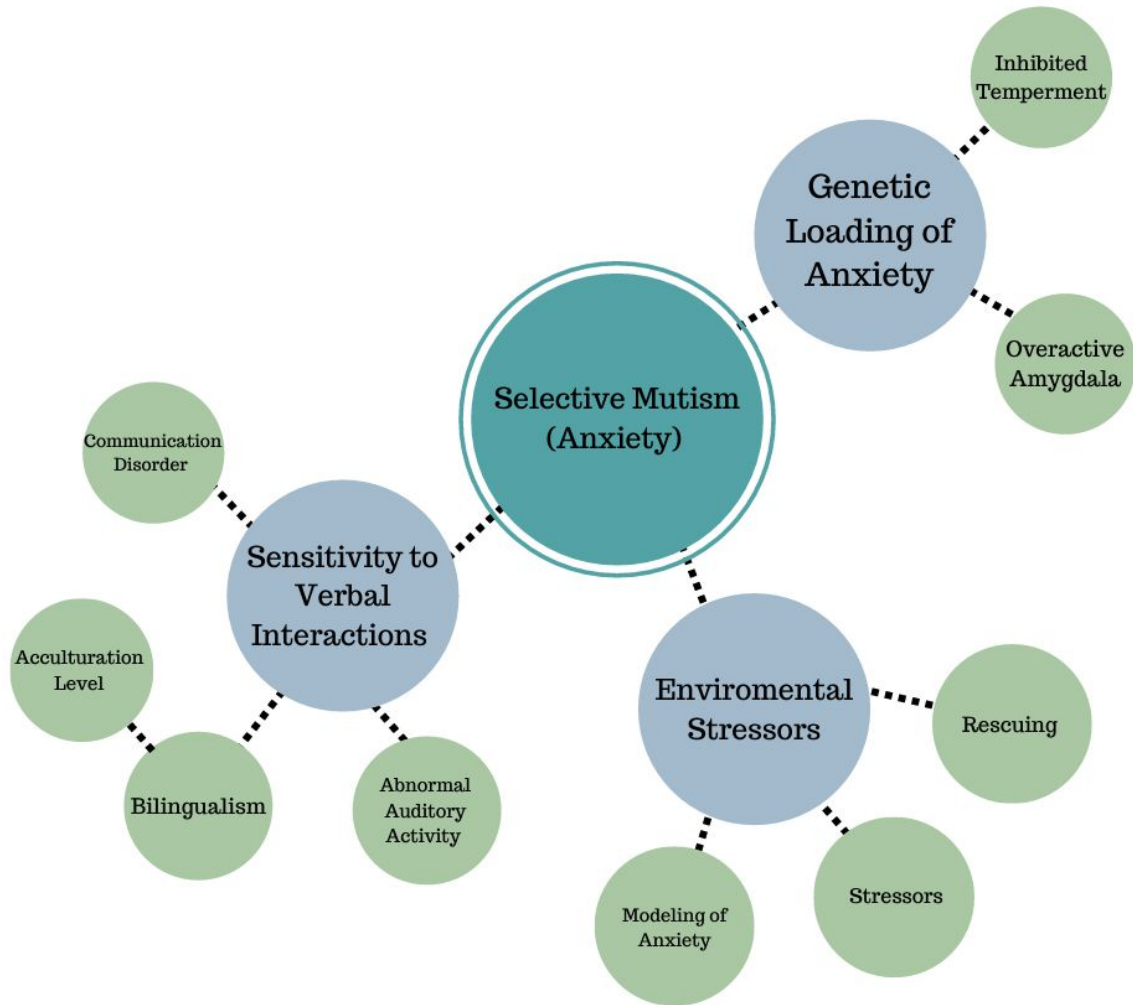
# Prevalence

Approximately 1% of school-aged children (Bergman et al., 2002; Elizur & Perednik, 2003; Kumpulainen et al., 1998, Rodrigues Peiera et al., 2021).

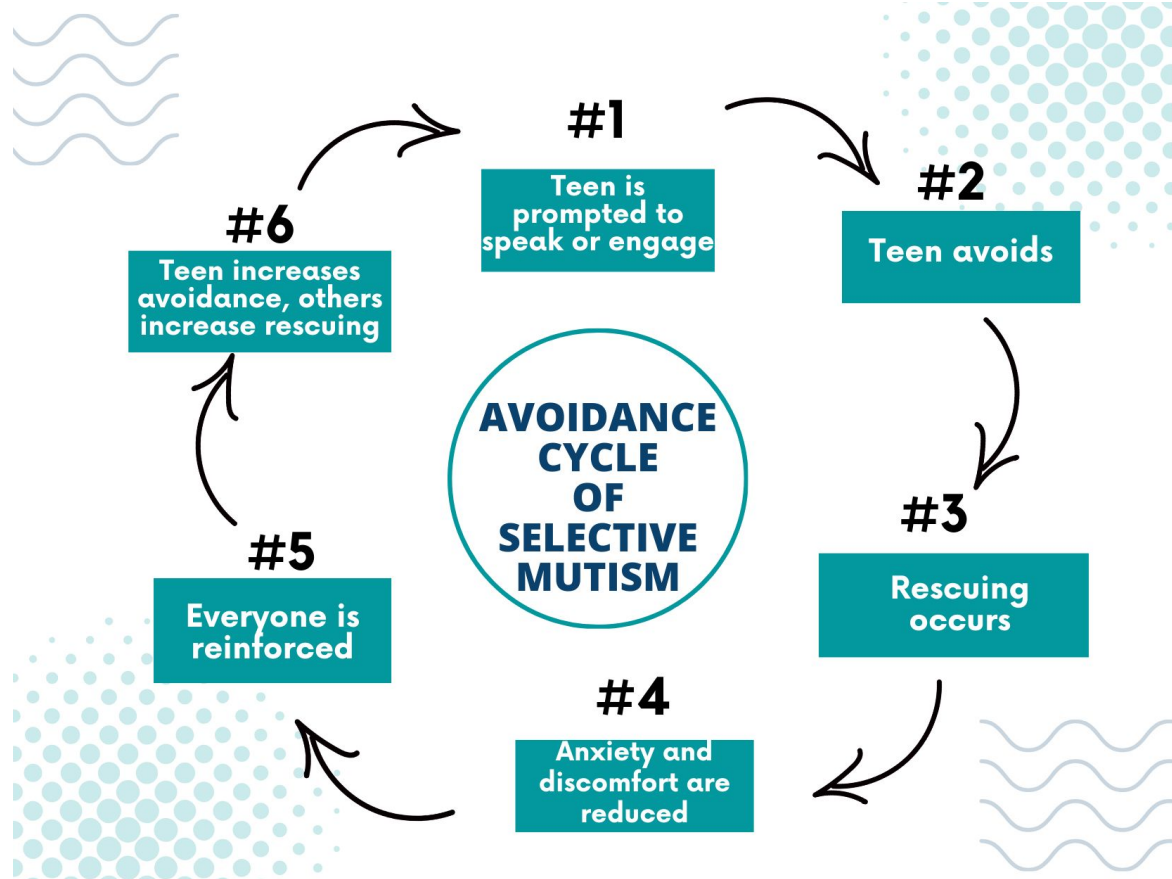
Sutton (2013) estimates approximately 1 in 2400 young adults meet criteria for SM

Females are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with SM (Kumpulainen, 2002, Garcia, 2004)





# Avoidance Cycle





# Commonly Reported Fears/Worries

Vogel et al 2019

**Table 2** Categories of reported fears with descriptions and frequencies

Category	Description	Percentage of participants who reported this specific fear (%)	Percentage of reported fears compared to all reported fears (%)
<b>Social fears</b>	Fears that conceptually belong to the spectrum of social anxiety	In sum 67	In sum 59
Fear of negative reaction	Fear that others react negatively to the individual's spoken words	35	24
Fear of social evaluation	Fear that others evaluate the individual because of his/her spoken words	23	16
Interactional fears	Fear of social interactions, especially with strangers or authority persons	12	8
Observational fears	Fear of getting attention from others while speaking	12	8
Fear of showing anxiety symptoms	Fear that others might notice individual's anxiety symptoms (e.g., heart beat)	5	3
<b>Fear of mistakes</b>	Fear to give an incorrect answer / to say something wrong in a content-related way / to deviate from expectations	40	28
<b>Language-related fears</b>	Fears that are related to the individual's language such as pronunciation, grammatical correctness etc. of spoken words	12	8
<b>Voice-related fears</b>	Fears that are related to the sound of the individual's voice	7	5

# Symptom Severity within SM

## Low Profile SM

May whisper or speak quietly

May speak, albeit infrequently

Usually no spontaneous speech with unfamiliar people

*Fear of disapproval outweighs fear of talking*



## High Profile SM

Entirely silent with certain people and in certain situations

*Fear of talking outweighs fear of disapproval*

White et al, 2022

# SM Presentation in Adolescence and Adulthood

Adults with history of/symptom of SM report:

- Symptoms first present between the ages of 0-4
- BUT that they did not find improvement or partial recovery until, on average, age 22
- Symptoms most severe and problematic between the ages of 12-19 (Sutton, 2013)



# Specific Impacts of SM in Teen Years



- Difficulty responding to classroom teacher during individual and group activities
- Difficulty initiating speech with classroom teacher
- Difficulty engaging with peers
- Structured activities (e.g., group projects/discussions) and unstructured activities (e.g., lunch, hallway passing time)
- Difficulty managing feelings (e.g., anxiety, stress), which can negatively impact student attention, comprehension, and output
- Independently initiating and maintaining friendships
- Advocating for needs/wants (e.g., ordering food in cafeteria, scheduling appointment with guidance counselor to plan high school coursework or discuss post-secondary plans)
- Participating in activities that help prepare them for young adulthood (E.g., driver's training, job interviews, college applications)
- Loss of practice opportunities in higher-level cognitive tasks, such as perspective taking, critical thinking

# Assessment

# Common Differential Diagnoses

Social Anxiety Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Speech or language disorders

“Silent period” during acquisition of a new language



# Shared Symptomatology

## Shyness

- Reserved, across settings
- Slow to Warm
- No/limited functional impact

## Social Anxiety

- Anxiety in situations with nonverbal and/or verbal expectations
- Fears of judgement and social embarrassment are primary
- Much extended “warm-up” time
- “Social situations avoided or endured with intense fear/anxiety”
- Functional impact
- Symptoms often apparent around pre-adolescence or adolescence

## Selective Mutism

- Two distinct personas, depending on setting and/or communication partner
- Potential “contamination”
- Much extended “warm-up” time
- Nonverbal performance often okay
- Link to speech/language concerns & multilingualism
- More BI in infancy/toddlerhood than those who go on to develop SAD (Gensthaler et al, 2016)
- Functional impact
- Symptoms often apparent age 3-4

**Genetic Predisposition, Behavioral Inhibition, Environmental Variables**

# Assessment Methods

Clinical Interview

Direct Observation

Behavioral Questionnaires

Frankfurt Scale for Selective Mutism

SCARED

RCADS

BASC

School Input– informal discussion with teachers/staff





# Key Interview Questions

**Who** does the individual currently talk to? Who are they unable to talk to (e.g., who are the people regularly in their lives with whom they cannot yet verbally communicate)?

In **what circumstances** would they be most likely to talk? If they need something? If someone asks them a direct question? If they are interacting one-on-one with someone? If approached by a peer?

**Where** is the individual able to speak? Only at home? In public to family members if no one is watching or listening?

**How** does the individual communicate? Gestures? Writing? Sounds? Whispering? Short responses? Responding to other people? Initiating to other people?

(Kotrba & Reed, 2023)



# Evidence-Based Intervention

# Behavior Therapy for SM

Steains et al (2021) meta-analysis

- Behavioral interventions (coupled with systems interventions such as parent and teacher education) were highly effective in treating SM
- Reported improvements including increased verbal output and general improvements in anxiety and overall well-being

Recognition of need for further research

Only two treatment studies include teens/young adults with SM

RCTs primarily using WL controls

REVIEW ARTICLE

WILEY

**Efficacy of psychological interventions for selective mutism in children: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials**

Sophie Y. Steains  | John M. Malouff  | Nicola S. Schutte 



# What is the Research?

TABLE 1 Key characteristics of included studies

Study	N	% fem	Mean age	Age range	Treatment condition	Treatment setting	No. of weeks	No. of sessions	Control condition	SM-specific	Non-SM-specific
Bergman et al. (2013)	21	48	5.43	4-8	Behavioural, systems	Clinic and school	24 <sup>a</sup>	20 <sup>a</sup>	Waitlist	SMQ, SSQ, SNAP	SASC-P/T
Cornacchio et al. (2019)	29	76	6.60	5-9	Behavioural, systems	Clinic	1	5	Waitlist with psychoed.	SMQ, SM CSR	CBCL-A, SA CSR, CGAS
Esposito et al. (2017)	138	48	7.79	6-18	Behavioural, systems	Home	24	72	Psychoed.	SMQ	CBCL
Oerbeck et al. (2014)	24	67	6.53	3-9	Behavioural, systems	Home and school	12	21	Waitlist with psychoed.	SMQ, SSQ	NA
Ooi et al. (2016)	21	38	8.62	6-12	Behavioural	Clinic	14	14	Video games with attention	SMQ	ACAS-P/C, CGI-5

Steains at al 2021

Merson 2021

First Author	Number of Hours/Weeks	Rapport Building	Parent Involvement	Shaping/Fading	Gradual Exposure	In-Session Community Practice	Rewards/Contingency Management	School Consultation/Sessions	Between Session Practice	Anxiety Management Strategies
Bergman (2013)	20/24	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Oerbeck (2014)	21/12	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ooi (2016)	14/14	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Esposito (2017)	54/24	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Klein (2017)	3/9 <sup>a</sup>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cornacchio (2019)	30/1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Catchpole (2019)	16/22	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

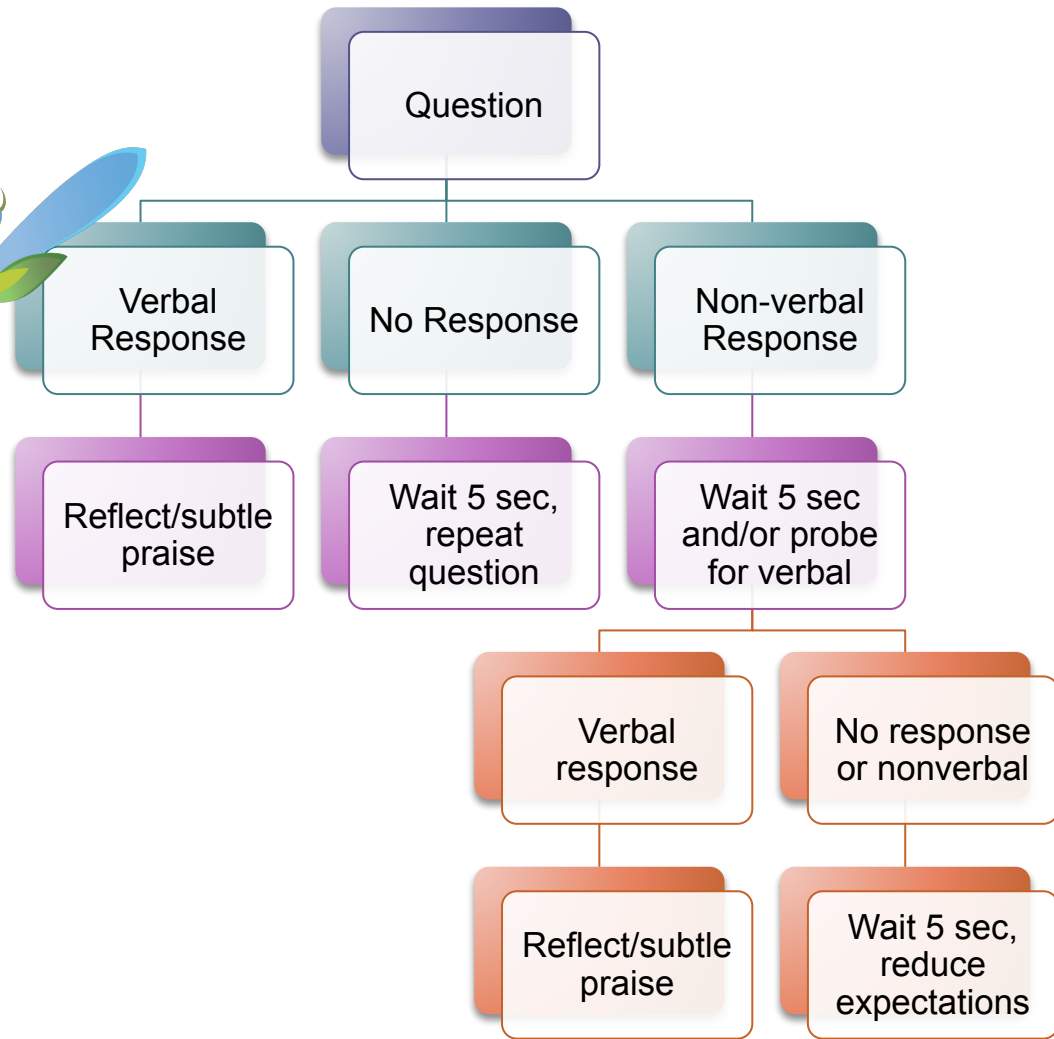
Exposure is primary  
mechanism of change



# Verbal Directed Interactions



<b>Do's</b>	<b>Do Not's</b>
Labeled Praise for talking	Mind read
Reflect verbalizations	Yes/No Questions
Behavioral Descriptions	Indirect commands to talk
Forced Choice/Open Ended Questions	Negative Talk
Direct prompts to talk	Enable/ Rescue
Wait 5" to respond	



# Crafting the right tone

Validation

Transparency

Psycho-education at a developmental level

Calm confidence (nonverbals must match tone)

Thoughtful use of praise





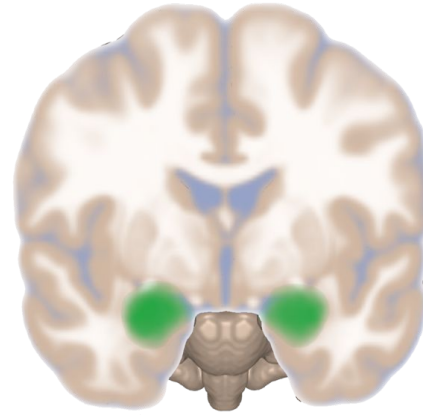
# Psychoeducation

Neurological underpinnings

Fight or flight response

Problem of avoidance

Goal - increase abilities and decrease avoidance via exposure



# Exposure Ideas

## Response goals:

- Ordering at the teen's favorite café or restaurant
- Going through the drive-through to order a soda
- Picking up the family's take-out order by giving their order number or the name on the order
- Answering a teacher's question in a private interaction about what they did over the weekend
- Visiting a pet store and answering the employee's question about what kind of dog they have
- Answering which video game they'd like to purchase (e.g., when games are stored behind locked glass)
- Answering their music instructor or coach's question about what they practiced over the week

## Initiation goals:

- Delivering a treat (or mis-directed mail) to a neighbor
- Calling an extended family member to wish them happy birthday
- Delivering something to the office staff at school
- Visiting the humane society and inquiring about one of the animals
- Going to a museum and asking for help in locating a certain exhibit
- Informing a teacher about a planned absence and asking about what they'll miss
- Asking an acquaintance about their weekend
- Asking a tablemate what the homework is
- Going to an escape room and reading a clue aloud

## Advanced goals:

- Giving a speech in class
- Completing a mock interview for a job or volunteer position
- Exchanging social niceties with others ("good morning," "please," "thank you," etc.)
- Volunteering to be the guest reader in a younger sibling's class



# Supplementary Strategies

Contingency Management

Medication

Cognitive Restructuring

Motivational Interviewing

Consideration of special education planning



# Case Illustration

Lane\* is a 17-year-old high school senior with SM.

Educational history:

- Montessori program for Kindergarten (highly anxious, hiding, lack of participation)
- Homeschool, 1st-3rd grade
- Local public school, 3rd-8th
- Small educational pod in response to covid pandemic
- Return to local public school, 11th grade
- Alternative educational setting, 12th grade

Treatment history:

- In-school intensive treatment, 7th grade
- Virtual weekly therapy sessions, 10th-11th grade
- Intensive Group Behavior Therapy (IGBT), summer before 12th grade
- Training for educational staff

Treatment considerations:

- VERY long latency to produce responses and long latency to execute exposure goals
- Perfectionism, even in nonverbal tasks
- Especially anxious to answer subjective/emotionally vulnerable questions
- Academic difficulties, concerns about meeting graduation requirements



# Additional Resources

Jon Kohlmeier's video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E85ZjZAoYk>

Jon Kohlmeier's website and book - <https://www.learningtoplaythegame.com/about>

Being Brave with Selective Mutism by Rachel Busman (tween age range)

Can I Tell You About Selective Mutism by Alison Wintgens and Maggie Johnson (tween age range)

Selective Mutism Association (SMA)

- Website and Youtube channel
- Hear Our Voices Panel



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"Putting the 'C' in CBT for Selective Mutism"

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