

Understanding & Treating Selective Mutism (SM)

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.

Children 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**.

Children with SM may also 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shy, show significant social anxiety or fear of embarrassment**, and may at times prefer to be **isolated and/or withdrawn**.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 communicate using **nonverbal behaviors**, such as:

- **Nodding or shaking head**
- **Pointing or gesturing**
- **Pulling or pushing**
- **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.

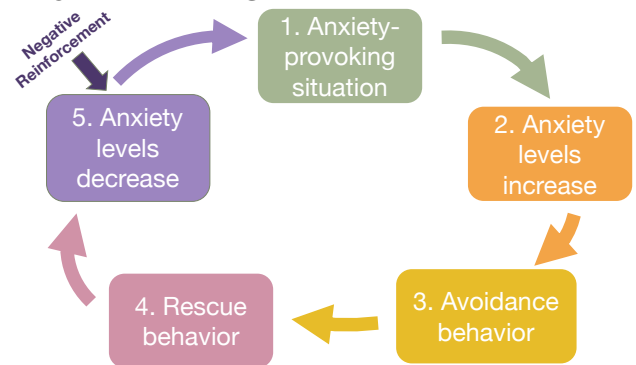
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Behavioral Conceptualization of SM

SM behaviors may result from a long series of **negatively reinforced interactions**. Negative reinforcement is when a behavior increases due to the subtraction of an aversive stimulus.

When the anxiety of speaking is taken away due to an adult rescuing the child from the expectation to speak, the child's nonverbal behavior is reinforced.

Cycle of Negative Reinforcement

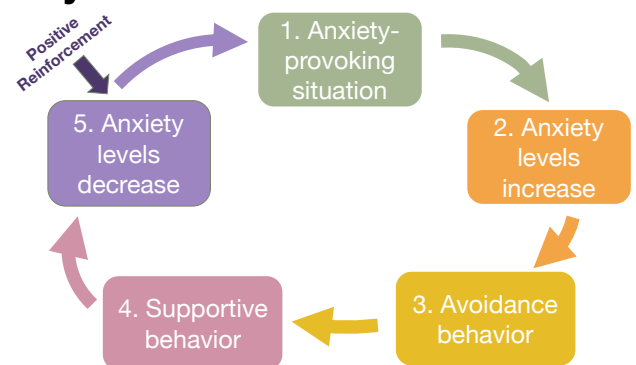


The cycle of negative reinforcement for SM proceeds as follows:

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

As a result, the child 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 child is to avoid speaking.

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 child with support to speak, the child's verbal behavior is reinforced.**

The cycle of positive reinforcement for SM proceeds as follows:

1. **Anxiety-provoking situation:** the child is prompted to speak
2. **Anxiety levels increase:** the child becomes overly anxious
 - ✦ the more the child practices, the less anxious they will get in subsequent exposures
3. **Avoidance behavior:** the child may try to avoid speaking by hiding, gesturing, or freezing
4. **Supportive behavior:** another individual provides the child 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 child feels less anxious following speech

As a result, the child makes the connection that speaking leads to rewarding responses and a reduction of anxiety levels. Over time, with consistent exposure and practice with “brave talking,” the child becomes increasingly reinforced to speak.

Understanding & Treating Selective Mutism (SM)

Child Directed Interaction (CDI) Skills

CDI skills are used during warm up periods with the child 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 with children!

<u>Skill</u>	<u>Reasons</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Labeled Praise: A positive statement about what the child is doing in the moment. <i>Tell your child exactly what you like about what they're doing!</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increases the praised behavior• Shows approval• Increases the child's self-esteem and confidence	Great job using your voice to answer my question! I love that you looked at me while you told me that.
Reflection: A statement that repeats back to the child his or her verbalization verbatim or paraphrases what the child said. <i>Avoid "tip ups" that turn the reflection into a question!</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shows interest in the child's ideas• Demonstrates acceptance and understanding• Improves the child's speech• Increases verbal communication	Child: I'm hungry Parent: You're telling me you're hungry. Child: Where is the bathroom? Parent: You're asking me where the bathroom is... (provide answer)
Behavioral Description: A statement about the child's moment-by-moment behavior. <i>Pretend you are a sportscaster!</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allows the child to lead the play• Demonstrates enthusiasm and interest• Teaches concepts• Models appropriate speech and vocabulary	You are coloring a flower with the red crayon. You're smiling and looking at the other children. I see you shaking your head.

CDI Guidelines

- ★ Follow the child's lead in the play
- ★ Avoid asking questions and giving commands
- ★ Avoid (constructive) criticism or any negative appraisals of the child'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 child!

Understanding & Treating Selective Mutism (SM)

Verbal Directed Interaction (VDI) Skills

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

<u>Type of Question</u>	<u>Considerations</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Forced Choice: A question in which two or more possible responses are given within the question.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helpful during early interactions or in difficult situations• Provides support in selecting a response, making it easier for the child to answer	Is your favorite color <i>pink</i> or <i>blue</i> ? Would you rather play on <i>the swings</i> , <i>the slide</i> , or <i>do you not care</i> ? Do you want to watch the movie <i>Frozen</i> or <i>a different movie</i> ?
Open Ended: A question in which a possible answer is not suggested within the question. <i>Typically starts with "who," "what," "where," "when," "why," or "how"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allows the child to be more expressive and come up with his or her own response• May be more challenging for children concerned with being "wrong" or evaluated	Who is your best friend? What did you do at school today? How many coins do you have? Why do you like cookies more than ice cream?
Yes or No: A question in which a possible or expected response is either "yes" or "no." <i>Try to avoid these!</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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, <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> ? Did you finish your homework? → Did you finish your homework <i>or are you not done yet</i> ? Did you make this yourself? → Did you make this yourself <i>or did someone help you</i> ?

VDI Guidelines

- ★ Always wait between 5-10 seconds for the child to answer
- ★ Use a reflection + a labeled praise to reinforce each and every 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 child struggles to respond verbally, return to the last situation he or she was successful
- ★ Always revisit questions that were initially left unanswered
- ★ Reflect the child'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

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VDI Sequence Examples

<p>When the child answers right away:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult: "Would you like to draw with crayons or markers?" (forced choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: "Markers." Adult: "Markers!" (reflection) "Great job telling me what you wanted to use!" (labeled praise) 	<p>When the child has difficulty choosing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult: "Do you want chocolate or vanilla ice cream?" (forced-choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: No response. Adult: "Chocolate or vanilla?" (forced choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: No response. Adult: "Do you want chocolate, yes or no?" (forced choice) Child: Nods head. Adult: "I see you nodding." (behavior description) "Is that a yes or a no?" (forced choice) Child: "...yes" Adult: "Yes, you want chocolate." (reflection) Good job telling me what you want!" (labeled praise)
<p>When the child answers with a nonverbal response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult: "Would you like to draw with crayons or markers?" (forced choice) Child: Immediately points to markers. Adult: "I see you pointing." (behavior description) "Does that mean you want the markers or crayons?" (forced choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: "I want the markers." Adult: "You want the markers!" (reflection) "Super job telling me what you wanted using your words!" (labeled praise) 	<p>When the child answers with a barely audible response:</p> <p>*Prompts for louder or full voice should only be used if child is ready to move to that higher step.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult: "Do you want to watch Cinderella or Frozen?" (forced-choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: Under breath "F..o..z.n." Adult: "I see you are trying to answer." (behavior description) "I couldn't hear you. Tell me again a little louder." (direct command) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: "Frozen." Adult: "You want to watch Frozen!" (reflection) "I love that you told me that with a loud voice!" (labeled praise)
<p>When the child answers in a whisper:</p> <p>*Prompts for louder or full voice should only be used if child is ready for the challenge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult: "Do you want to eat your sandwich or your pretzels first?" (forced-choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: "Sandwich." (whisper) Adult: "I hear you whispering." (behavior description) "Tell me what you want with your full voice." (direct command) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: "Sandwich." (full voice) Adult: "You want to eat your sandwich first!" (reflection) "Great job using your full voice to tell me!" (labeled praise) 	<p>When the child doesn't respond at all:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult: "Would you like cookies or crackers for snack?" (forced-choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: No response. Adult: "Cookies or crackers?" (forced-choice) <i>Wait! 1 2 3 4 5 seconds</i> Child: No response. Adult: "Do you want cookies for snack, yes or no?" (forced-choice) Child: 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 mom and then come back and tell me."

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Earning Rewards

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

In order to effectively motivate and reinforce the child, it is important that there is **consistency**, **predictability**, and **follow through** within the system.

- **Consistency:** consistently monitor and label the behavior that will be rewarded
- **Predictability:** make sure it is clear to everyone involved how the child 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)



Bravery Charts can be used to monitor and reinforce a child's brave, approach-oriented behavior. One way these charts are used includes a tiered-approach to contingency management, such that:

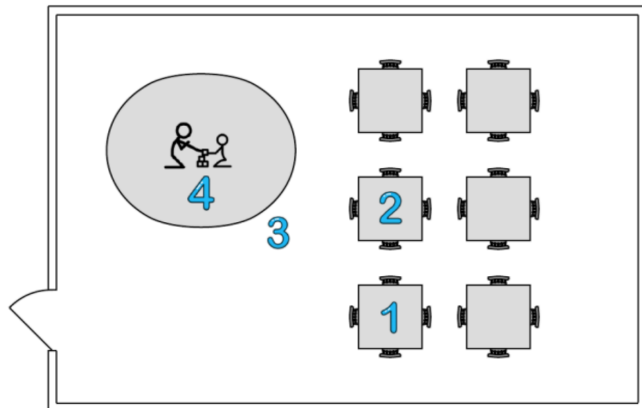
1. The child receives a check on his or her chart each time he or she demonstrates a brave behavior (e.g., audible speech)
2. Once the child has filled up the chart, he or she receives a token and the chart is wiped blank, so that the child can continue earning checks
3. At the end of the bravery practice (e.g., a session), the child trades in his or her tokens for a reward

Note: if the child does not seem reinforced by this system (e.g., checks and tokens), it is important to find an alternative that is positively reinforcing and motivating for the child (e.g., stickers, gummies/small candies)

The child's contingency management system should evolve over time to reflect the child's progress, such that as the child 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
- Ensure the child 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 child, providing social and tangible reinforcement (e.g., labeled praises, checks on the child's bravery 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 child, but continue to engage in the separate task
3. Move closer to the child and begin to occasionally use CDI skills to reinforce the child's behavior (e.g., "I love how I could hear your voice from over here," "You're coloring so nicely with your mom!")
4. Begin to engage in the activity with the child and familiar person, while continuing to use CDI skills, and ask a forced-choice question to the child related to his or her play (e.g., "Is the marker you're using red or blue?")
 - Use VDI skills to facilitate a verbal response; if the child 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 child, and eventually leaving the room

Shaping

To support a child's ability to meet new and/or challenging goals, the child 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 child's behavior entails providing positive reinforcement to the child 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 child 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 child to complete it)

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