

Selective Mutism & Reluctant Speakers: Practical Strategies for Parents & Caregivers

Dr. Alex DiGiacomo, Dr. Rosalind Catchpole,
& Dr. Tamara Salih

May 20th, 2021

Welcome! We will begin the presentation shortly. Please note that your microphones have been muted automatically.





Webinar #1: Available Now!

**Selective Mutism & Reluctant Speakers:
Practical Strategies for School Professionals**

keltymentalhealth.ca/SelectiveMutismWebinarSeries



Housekeeping

- Attendees are automatically muted and cameras are turned off.
- Please submit questions for the speakers through the “Q&A” function. There has been an option enabled where you can vote for questions that you want answered.
- Please submit technical questions or comments through the “Chat” function
- At the end of the webinar, a survey will pop up that we invite you to complete
- A PDF of the slides is currently available at keltymentalhealth.ca/SelectiveMutismWebinarSeries
- The webinar will be recorded and made available at the same link
- This information applies to the context in British Columbia. If you are in another jurisdiction please consult local health and school authorities for further information.



Speakers



Dr. Alex DiGiacomo

Psychology Post-Doctoral Fellow
Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic
BC Children's Hospital & UBC



Dr. Tamara Salih, MD, FRCPC

Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist
Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic
BC Children's Hospital




Dr. Rosalind Catchpole, R.Psych

Psychologist and Clinic Head
Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic
BC Children's Hospital



Land Acknowledgments

We acknowledge with immense gratitude that we live, work, and play on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the x^wməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation



Professional Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of our colleagues over the years as we have developed and refined our treatment approach, including

- Dr. Steven Kurtz
- Dr. Annie Simpson
- Dr. Susan Baer
- Dr. Janet Mah
- Dr. Megan MacFadden
- Dr. Jane Garland

WHAT ARE WE COVERING TODAY?

- Understanding selective mutism (SM) & reluctant talkers
- How to set your child up for speaking success
- How to collaborate with pre-school or school
- How to build momentum and expand speech to different situations
- When to reach out for extra help
- Q&A



What is SM ?

An anxiety disorder where kids speak comfortably at home but struggle to speak in other places

- Affects just under 1% of kids
- Can be more common if English is a second language
- Usually starts in preschool age



What SM *is* vs. what SM *is not*



An anxiety disorder



Not a child being defiant or manipulative on purpose

Not due to trauma or abuse

Not the same as regular shyness...kids don't always "grow out of it"

Not a form of autism, disability, or a speech problem



Why do we want to help kids find their voice?

Kids often feel proud
when they conquer
this fear

Kids can have more
fun at school and
participate more fully
academically

Can help their
emotional and social
worlds develop

Can advocate for
themselves and their
needs



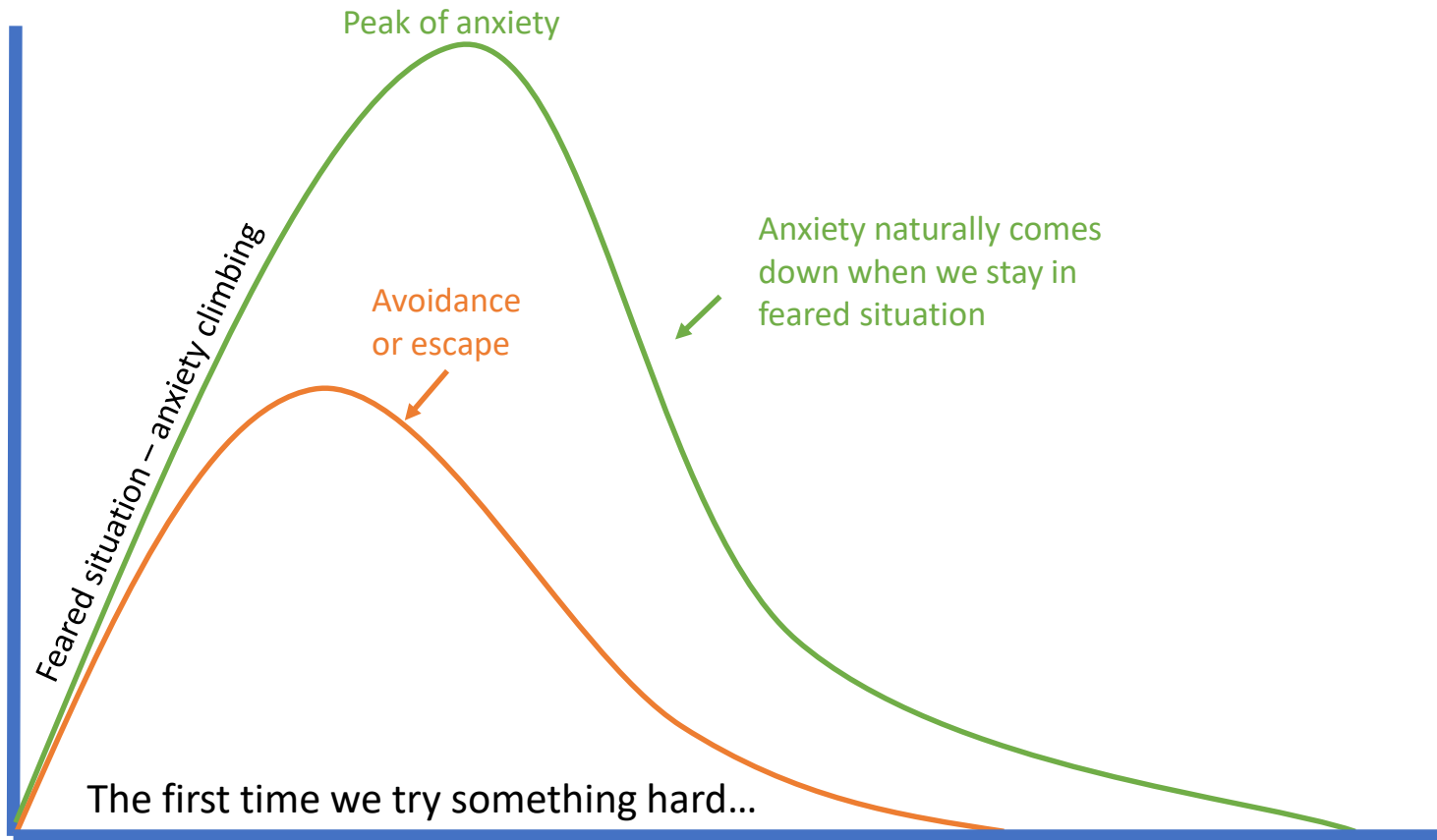


What is the outlook for kids with SM?

- As a caregiver, you may feel worried about your child's future
- We have good news: there is every reason to be hopeful!
- **With the appropriate supports, kids most often get better**
- **Our goal:** to equip you to best support your child & help them flourish

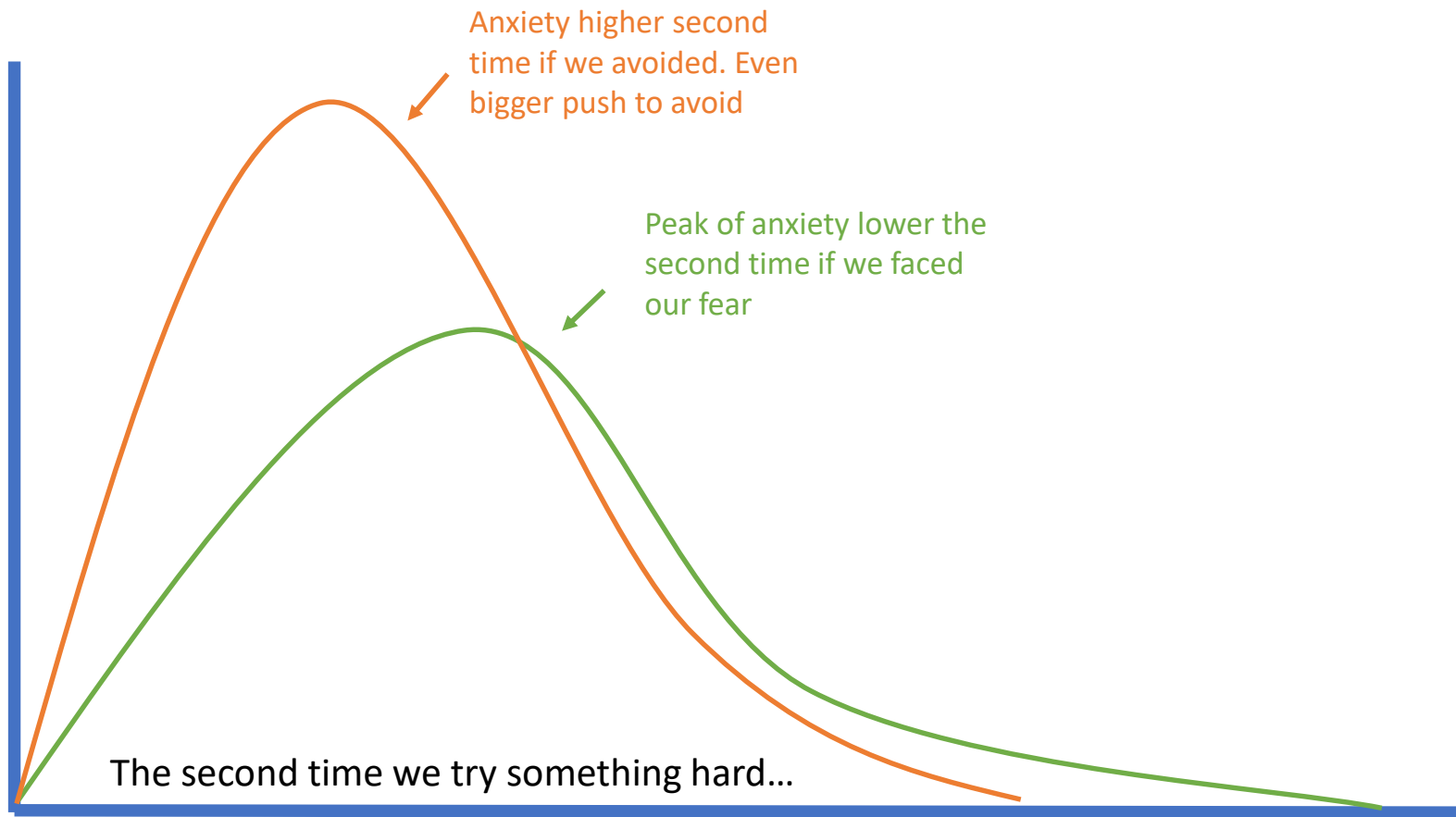


Let's understand: what keeps anxiety going?



One of the things that keep anxiety & SM going is AVOIDANCE

Let's understand: what keeps anxiety going?

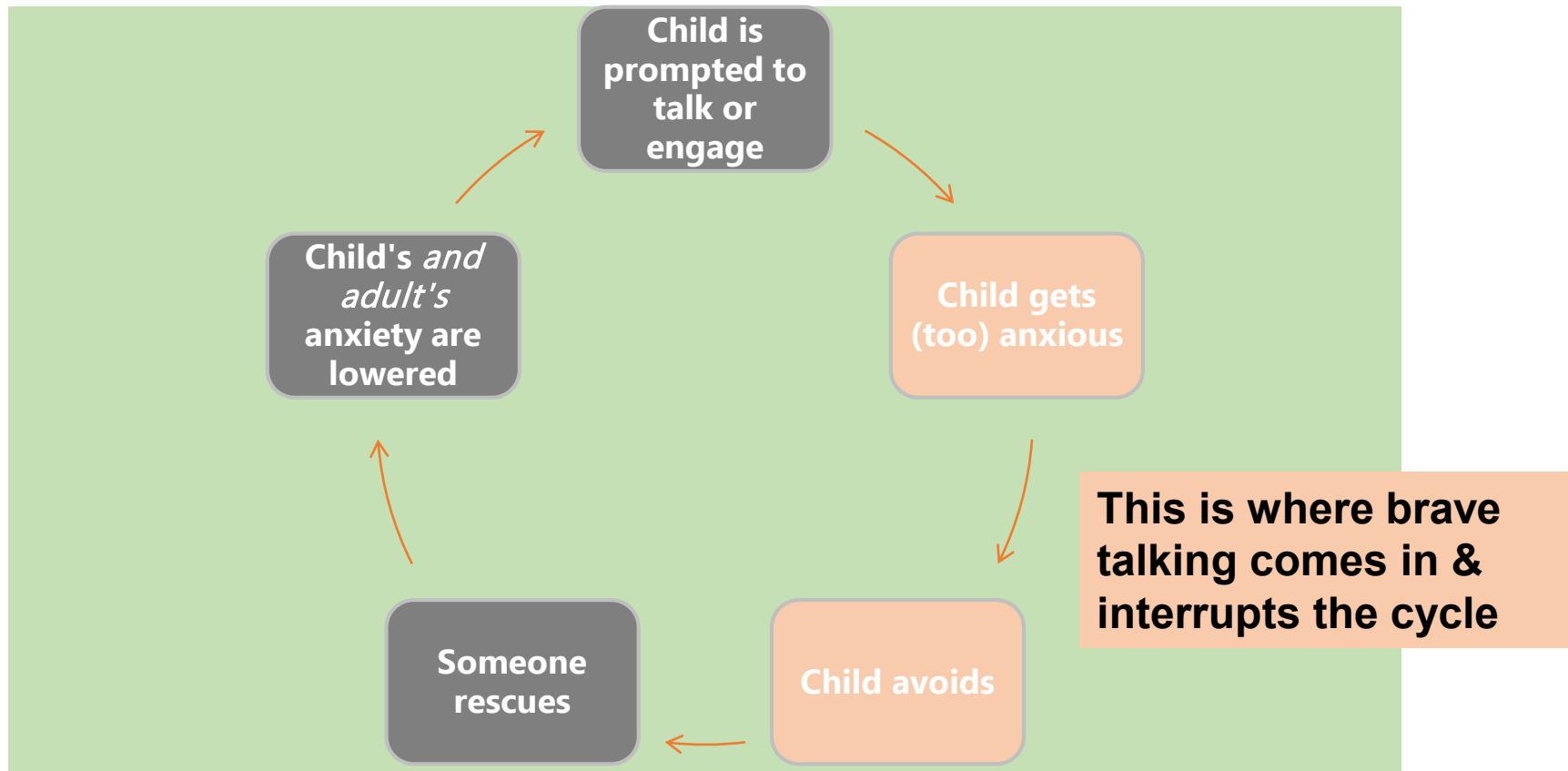


One of the things that keep anxiety & SM going is AVOIDANCE

One of the things that helps anxiety & SM get better is FACING FEARS

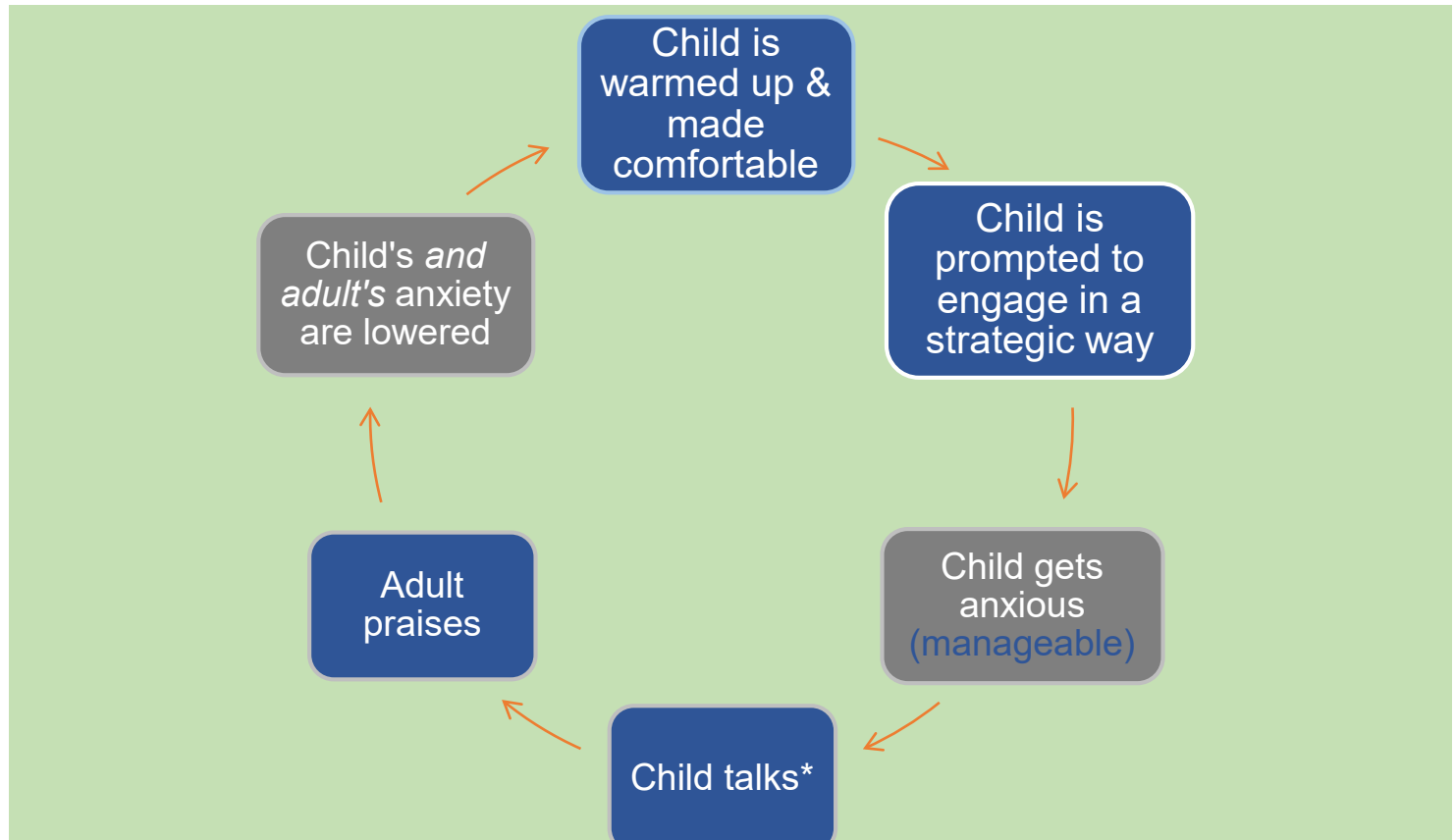
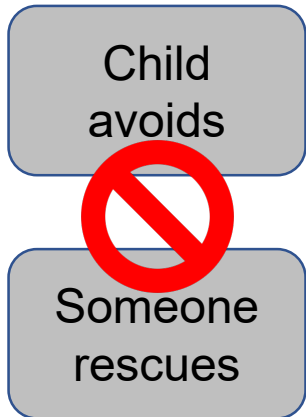
Let's understand: what keeps SM going?

The cycle of non-speaking gets practiced many, many times!



Let's understand: what are we aiming for?

To practice the brave talking cycle many, many times!



*the goal is to get closer and closer to normal talking

5 steps:
helping
your child
find their voice

ACTION PLAN



Identify:	where your child struggles	1
Brainstorm:	brave talking goals	2
Prepare:	set the stage for success – T&T* <small>*tools & team</small>	3
Ready:	yourself 😊	4
Act:	use SM skills!	5



Case Example “Nelly*”

* De-identified compilation of youth

Info: 5-year-old Chinese-Canadian girl who lives with her parents, younger brother, and pet dog, Suzy. Nelly is very outgoing at home and loves to play with Suzy, play dress-up, and do arts & crafts. She also loves gummy bears.

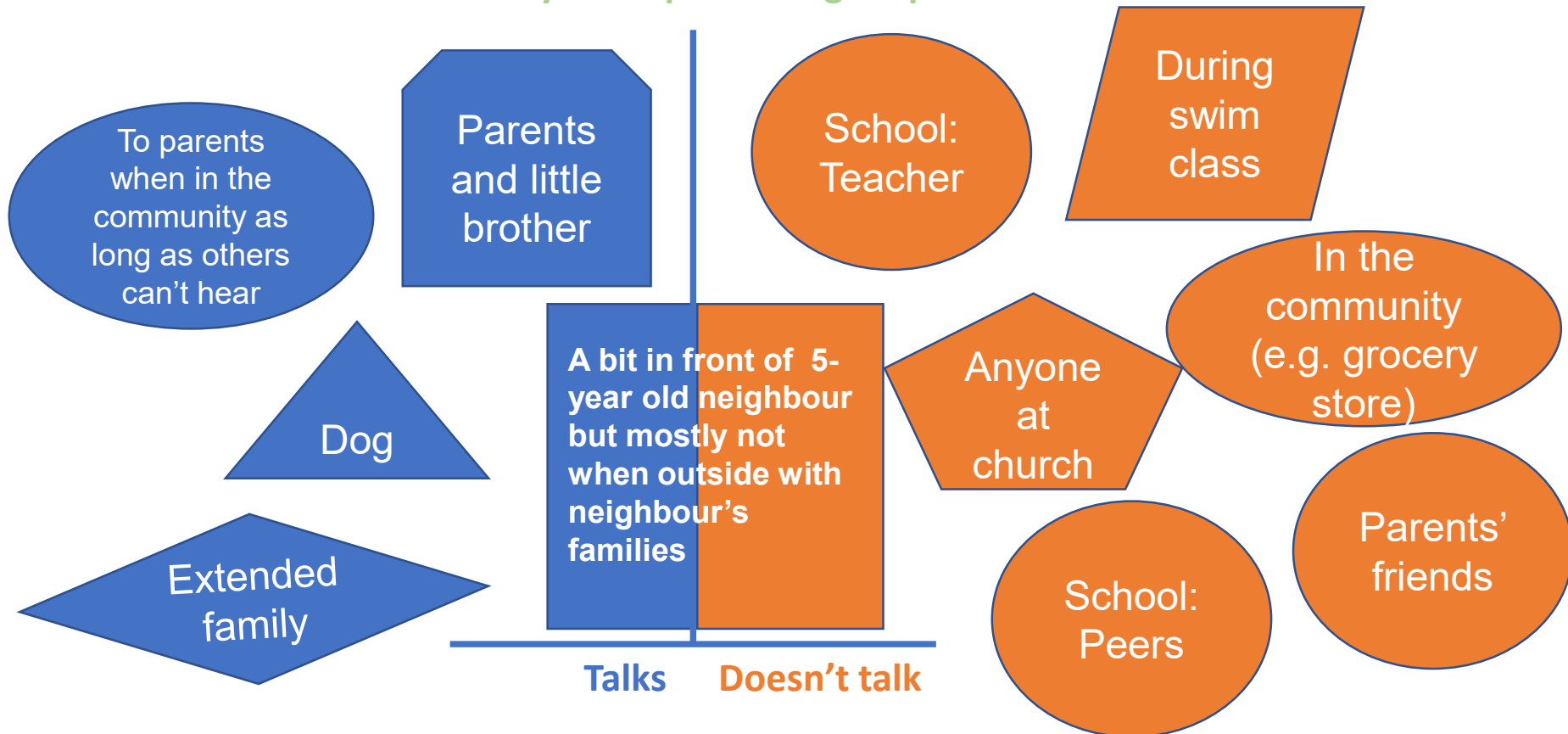
Observations: Nelly’s mother noticed that Nelly shuts down and doesn’t speak around anybody other than her immediate and extended family – she clings to her mother at the grocery store and anywhere else where there are other people within earshot

Situation: Nelly’s pediatrician made a diagnosis of SM, which Nelly’s mother had never heard of. She began reading about how to help her child.....

Step 1: *Identify* where your child struggles

Who is already in your child's talking circle and where do they need help being brave?

Nelly's Sample Talking Map:



Step 2: *Brainstorm* first talking goals

Nelly's Sample Talking Goals

Sphere	Goal
Home	No work needed
School	Talk to teacher & 1-2 peers
Extended Family	No work needed
Spiritual Community	Harder; work on later
Extended Personal Community	Talk to one neighbourhood kid & parents
Broader Community	Be able to order a hot chocolate herself
Extracurricular	Harder; work on later



Step 3: Set the stage for success by *preparing your toolkit*

Warm-up tools

A quiet space & some
time

Your child's favourite
activities that don't
require talking

Popular options include:

- drawing supplies
- craft supplies
- building blocks or Jenga
- exploring outside
- lego

Step 3: Set the stage for success by *preparing your toolkit*

Brave talking tools

Reinforcers

Could be: points, stickers, candy, toy coins, dollar store prizes

Individual & Group Talking Games

Usually at home or at a playdate

We love: Spot It, Zingo, Guess who, Go Fish, I Spy, Hangman (Can be creative – use anything that involves talking 😊)

Talking Quests

Usually involves going up to people on the street or at a park

People Bingo, Talking Scavenger Hunts, Favourites Game, Science Surveys

BRAVE TALKING SURVEY

Do you have a sister or no sister?	Do you like pizza or sushi better?	Have you been on an airplane or not been on a plane?
Have you been camping or not been camping?	Do you like ice cream or you don't like ice cream?	Do you like broccoli or cake better?
Do you have a brother or you don't have a brother?	Do you like to read or you don't like to read?	Have you ever played Guess Who or you haven't?

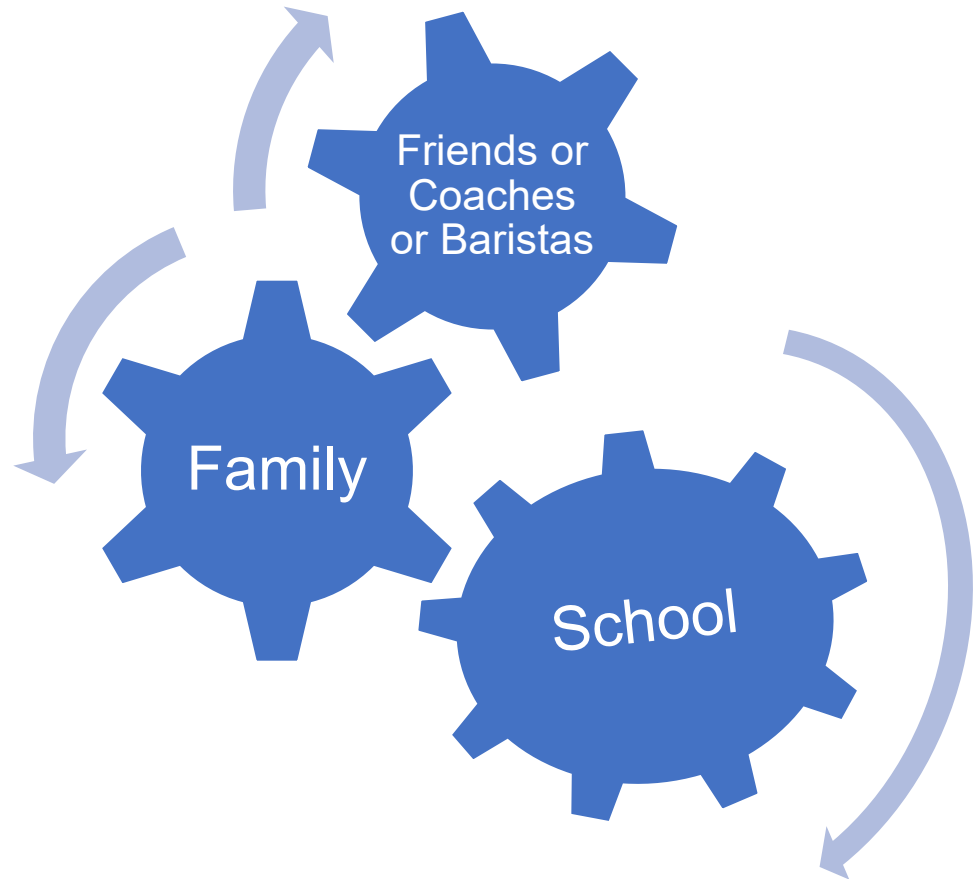
**PEOPLE
BINGO
OR
SCAVENGER
HUNT**

Find Someone Who:

Has three brothers	Likes to eat anchovies	Has lived in another country
Doesn't like pizza	Has a pet	Loves ice-cream
Doesn't like ice-cream	Is a good singer	Likes to swim

Step 3: Set the stage for success by *preparing your team*

- Helping kids to find their voice is a team sport!
- We have found that most of the time, people are willing to help....
- The school team is critical to success if your child struggles with speaking at school



Step 3: Set the stage for success *by preparing your team*

Communicating well with school team (you'll need a 'coach' and a 'quarterback') is important

- Find out: Who does the child seem most comfortable with at school? Who are they speaking to?
- Send a video showcasing child's speech & personality at home
- If child hasn't been talking beyond the first month of school, consider advocating for IEP and more supports
- Educate school about SM
 - send them our talk for school professionals:
<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/SelectiveMutismWebinarSeries>



Coach: To co-ordinate the SM work & figure out the next move



Quarterback: To establish speech with the child & transfer speech to others

Step 4: Ready yourself *emotionally*

We know that helping our kids
face their talking fears
is the key to improving SM...



...the problem is: **this can be emotionally very hard to do. Why?**

We are all wired to
PROTECT our kids
from distress

We may “catch” their
anxiety, and struggle
to cope with their
distress

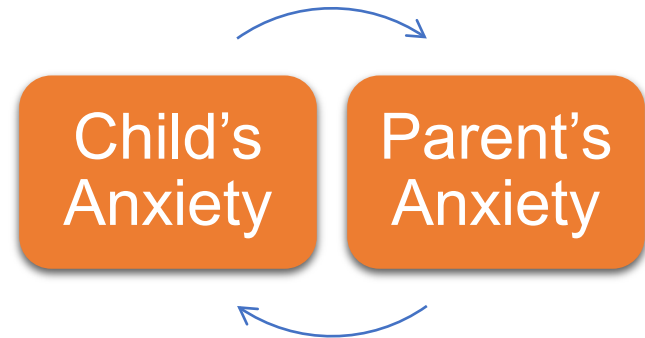
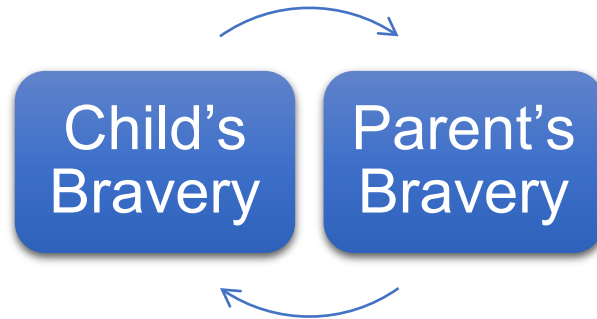
We may have our
own social anxiety

Step 4: Ready yourself – think about pacing



- Parenting and caregiving are challenging at the best of times
- Though some reluctant speakers will flourish with only a bit of extra support, parents and caregivers of kids with more severe SM may face a longer road
- *Pacing* (and your own self-care) become increasingly important as the road gets longer (marathon vs. sprint)

Step 4: Ready yourself to communicate confidence



Try to*:

- Take a deep breath & keep a smile on your face
- Remember it's normal for kids to feel anxious and want to avoid brave talking. Expect some distress!
- Remember with an appropriate plan it's not harmful to encourage kids to face their fears
- Remember confidence will increase with each step!

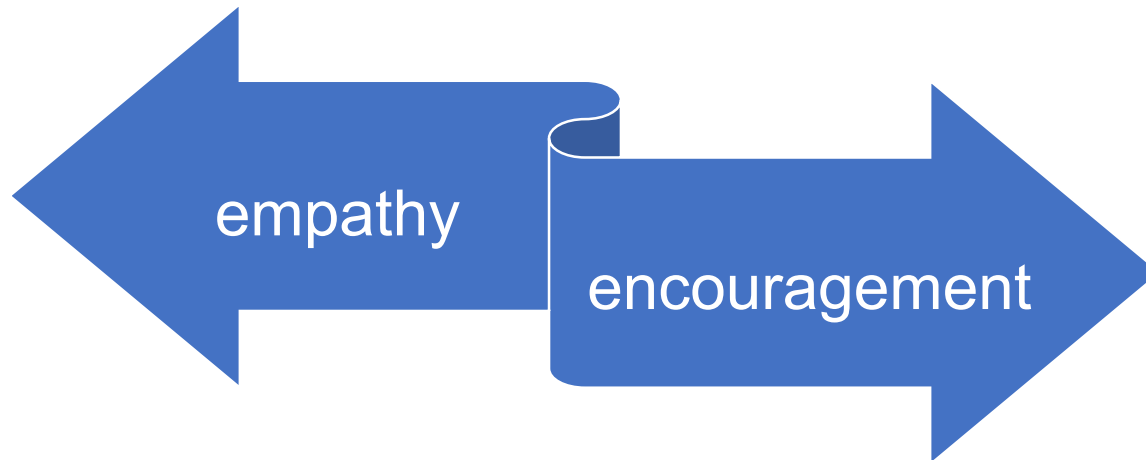
Try not to*:

- Jump in to answer for your child
- Let them communicate non-verbally
- "Mind read" or guess at what they want
- Skip social events or avoid situations that would make them uncomfortable

*you will not do this perfectly &
THAT IS OK 😊

Step 4: Ready yourself to *communicate confidence*

Helpful & effective responses contain BOTH...



“I know using your brave voice feels scary”

“and I know you can do it. I’m so proud of you.”

Step 4: Ready yourself to *communicate confidence*

“This silence is not acceptable.”
“They can’t be allowed to get away with this.”



Being too soft

Being too tough

“This kid is so scared. Should I just take them out of school?”
“I don’t want to push them. I don’t think they can handle it”



Step 5: Use SM Skills!

- Refer back to your child's early brave talking goals
 - You will use these SM skills in each of these areas
- There are 2 equally important skills
 - #1 Warm-up
 - #2 Encouraging brave talking

SKILL #1 OF 2: WARM UP

Goal: To get kids comfortable one-on-one

How: Let them settle in **WITHOUT** asking questions & **WITHOUT** giving commands to talk

A note on manners: during warm-up (and even in the early stages of brave talking), kids are off the hook from saying “hi”, “bye”, “please” or saying people’s names

Praise	I love the way you’re dressing that doll so beautifully
Reflect	Any and all verbalizations (“He’s barking!”)
Imitate	Do as the child is doing (join Nelly in dressing her dolls)
Describe	You’re petting Suzy the dog so nicely!
Enjoy	Have fun with the child

SKILL #2 OF 2: ENCOURAGING BRAVE TALKING

Goal:

To get kids talking

When:

After a period of warm-up

How:

Begin asking questions, but be strategic!

The type of question can increase the likelihood of a verbal response



Forced choice questions are the most likely to produce a verbal response:

Do you like
chocolate or
broccoli better?

Should we keep
playing or go
outside?

SKILL #2 OF 2: ENCOURAGING BRAVE TALKING

Goal:

To get kids talking

When:

After a period of warm-up

How:

Begin asking questions, but be strategic!

Open-ended questions are sometimes harder, but encourage more spontaneous speech

- Which one is your doll?
- What did you do at school?

Yes/No questions should be avoided b/c they do not encourage verbal response

- Do you like this doll? (child can nod)
- Say, “I see that you are nodding your head, does that mean yes or something different?”

SKILL #2 OF 2: ENCOURAGING BRAVE TALKING

Goal:

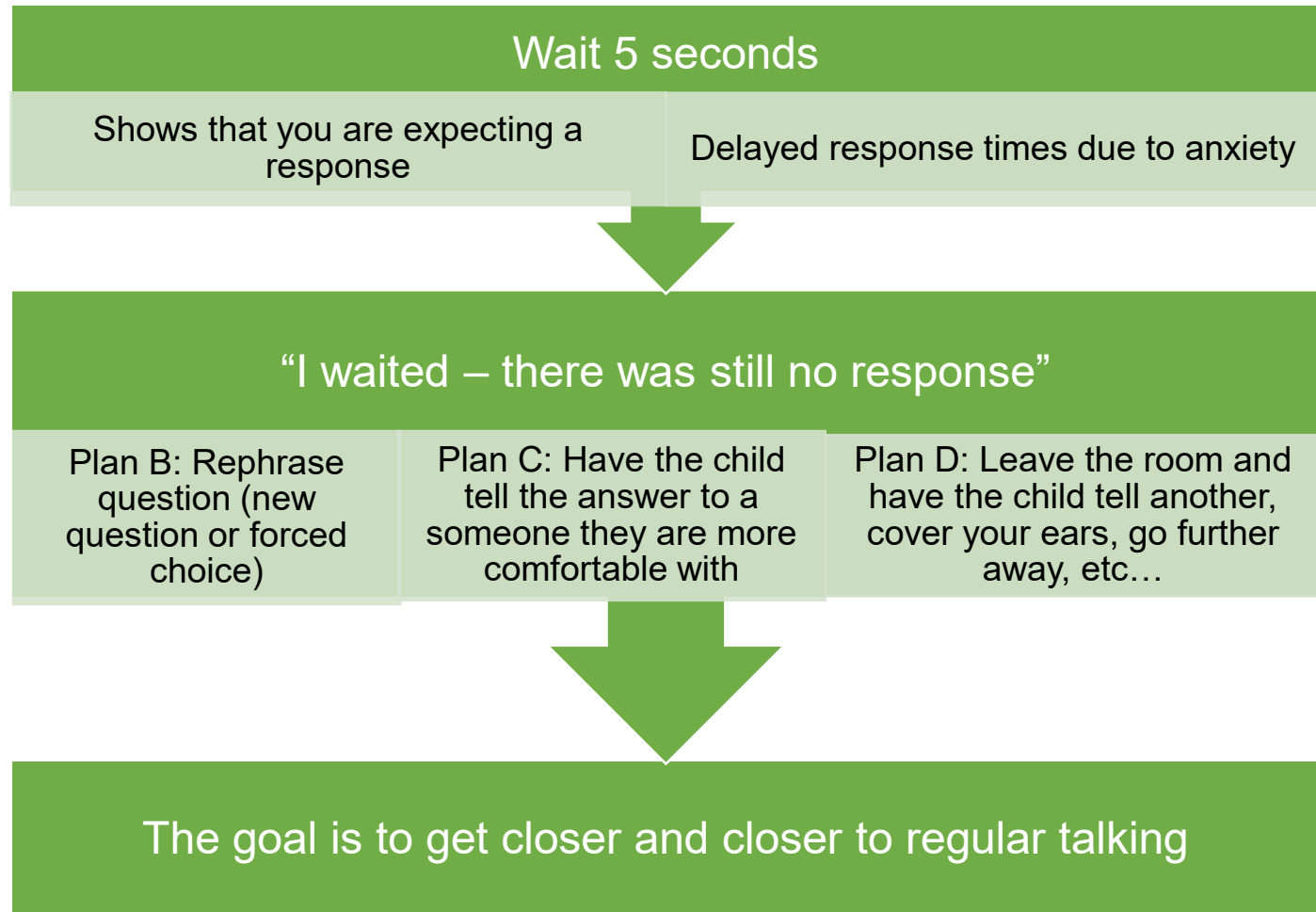
To get kids talking

When:

After asking a question

How:

Give them enough of a chance to respond!



SKILL #2 OF 2: ENCOURAGING BRAVE TALKING

Goal:
To make it
more likely
that kid will
speak again!

When:
After a child
has spoken

Repeat what they say

Shows child and others that
child was heard

Communicates that child's
utterance matters



Praise

Great job letting me know what your favourite doll is! Thanks for
telling me you like the colourful dress!



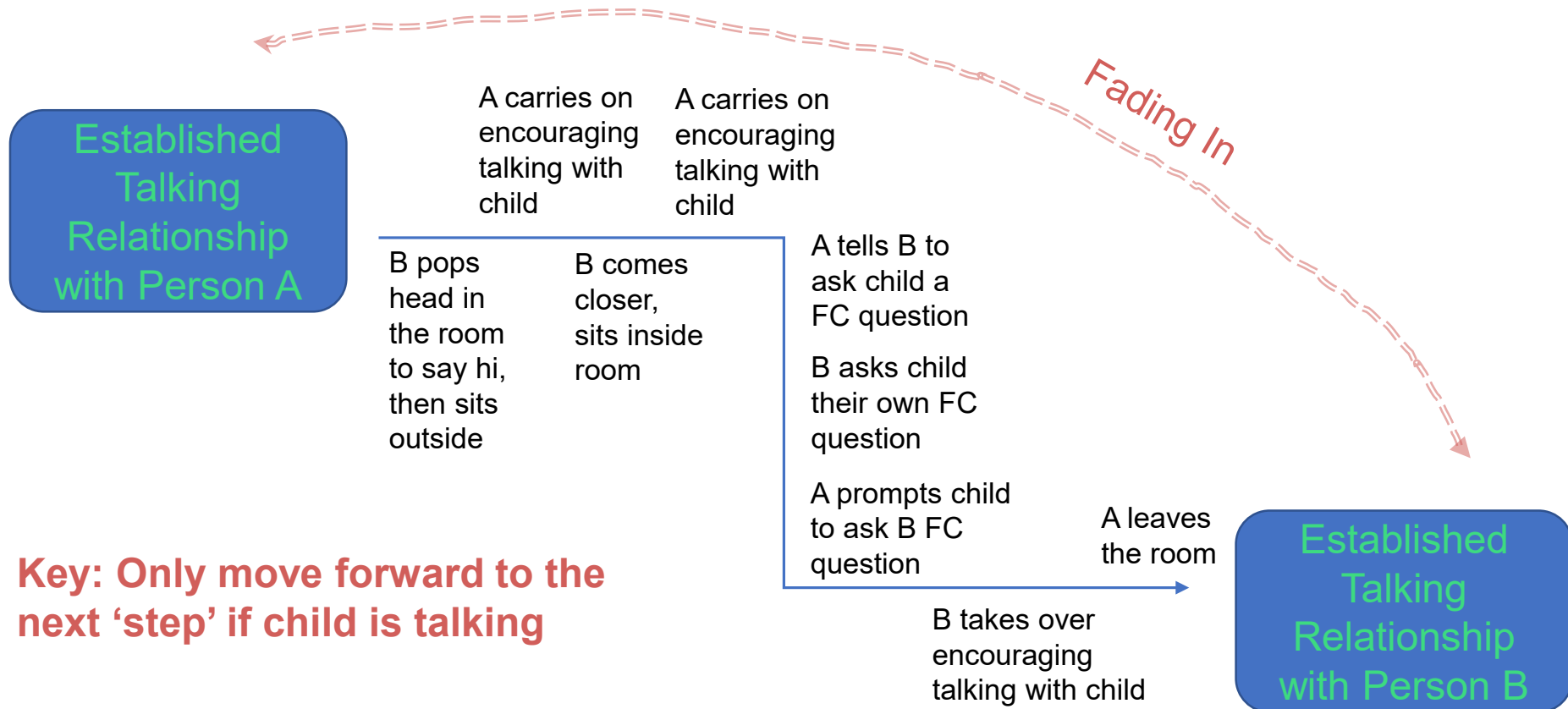
Reward

Would you like a sticker or a point?
Here's 5 points for that one!

THE “FADE IN” PRINCIPLE

Also known as “transferring speech” or “passing the baton”

- At the core of SM intervention
- The mechanism by which kids expand their talking circle
- Simple in theory, but can have many steps...



Nelly's Sample Talking Ladder

Goal: Talk to her teacher (T)

Keys:

- Only move on to the next 'step' if child is talking (e.g., mom wouldn't do her phone call until T & Nelly speaking comfortably)
- Pacing will vary! Some kids will do the below in 30minutes, for others it may take several sessions
- Goals/steps will vary! Some already speak to a person at school; others struggle only with peers

Steps

Nelly and mom alone in the school yard, playing with Suzy (dog)

T pops over briefly; then sits at a distant picnic table

T comes closer and sits within earshot

T comes up to Nelly & mom holding wrapped gummy bears

Mom tells T to ask Nelly if she likes playing catch with Suzy or if she doesn't

T praises, rewards with gummy bear, asks her own question

Mom says she needs to go & make a phone call

T continues with encouraging talking

Established Reinforcer:

Mom & T have gummy bears

Nelly's Sample Talking Ladder

Goal: Talk to neighbourhood kid and adult
(play date)

Keys:

- Pacing will vary! Some kids will do the below in 30minutes, for others it may take several sessions
- Goals/steps will vary!

Steps

Mom
preps
other
mom on
warm up
skills and
to not ask
questions

Nelly and
mom alone
in front of
house
playing with
Suzy (dog)

Kid and
other
mom
come over
to pet the
dog

Both
moms do
lots of
warm up

Nelly's
mom asks
other kid if
they like
dogs or if
they don't
like dogs

Nelly's
mom asks
Nelly the
same
question
which
they
practiced
before
hand

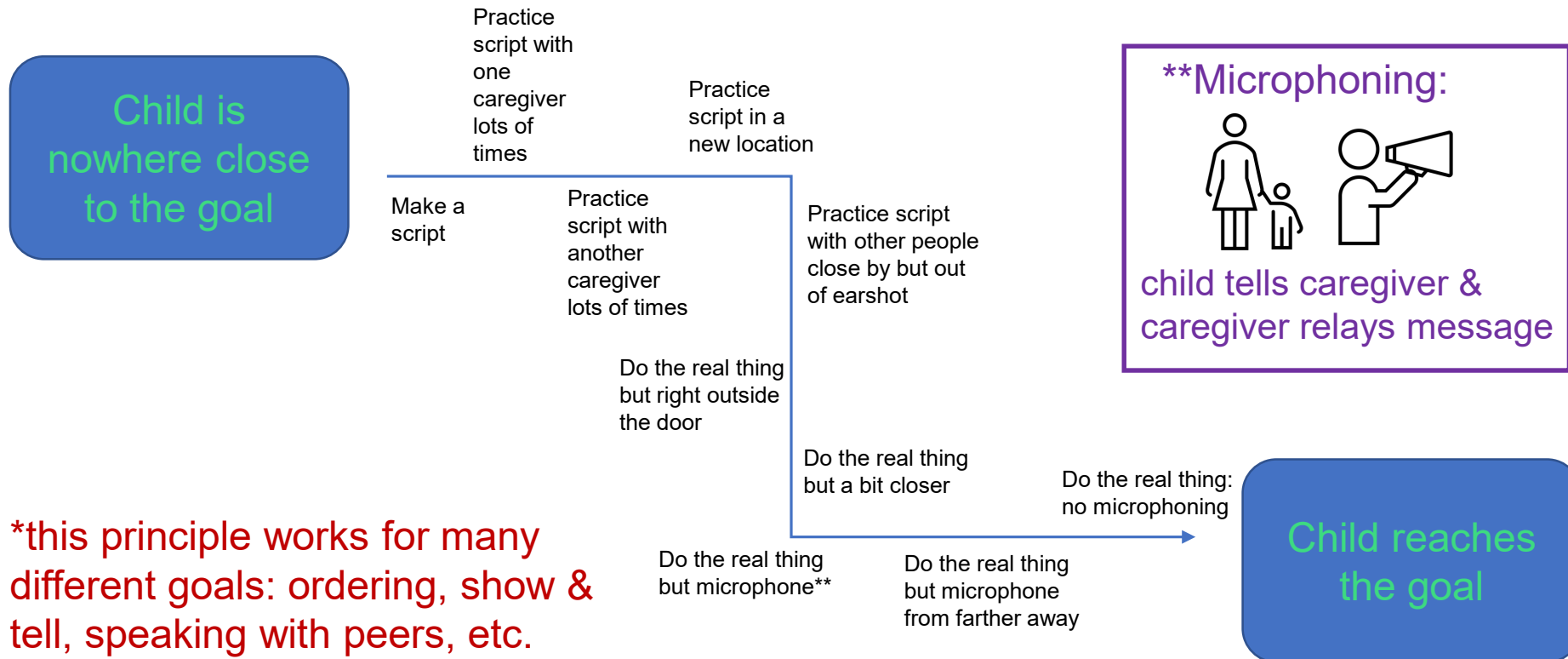
Nelly's
mom asks
both girls
whether
they want
to play
Spot It

Kids play
Spot It with
both moms
(Mom
microphoning
if needed)

**Established
Reinforcer:**
Mom has gummy bears

THE “SCAFFOLDING” PRINCIPLE

- At the core of SM intervention
- The mechanism by which kids build momentum and make progress on tough goals*
- Simple in theory, but easy to forget about and go to fast!





Tips for Success

Don't underestimate the value of momentum!
Success breeds success!

Remember the brave talking ladder! Work on new goals whenever possible (change one thing at a time: person, space, activity)

Movement & silliness are magic – both help kids feel comfortable and decrease anxiety

Remember pacing! Pick times to practice brave talking so it's not on your mind all the time

If you get stuck, change your course but try not to let them off the hook entirely

Be kind to yourself.
Using the SM skills takes a lot of energy and can be hard work!

When To Seek Help



If child remains
stuck on a step
for several
weeks



If child remains
very frozen



If child doesn't progress
to any new talking
partners after 4-6 solid
attempts



If child is older
and/or if there are
barriers with
collaborating with
school



How To Seek Help

- self-refer to local CYMH team:
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use/child-teen-mental-health>
- obtain referral to pediatrician from family doctor
- obtain referral to Mood & Anxiety Disorder Clinic at BCCH from family doctor (in severe cases only)
- private psychologists





The role of medication

- Sometimes, medication can be a very helpful adjunct to these strategies
- Can bring down physiological anxiety & help kids to make progress
- A complicated decision...but if child is not progressing, worth discussing with a pediatrician or a psychiatrist

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

Early intervention is preferable

Key skills are warming up and encouraging speech strategically

Remember the fade-in and scaffolding principles

Expect some anxiety.
Confidence & playfulness are key!

Selective Mutism is a very treatable anxiety disorder. There is every reason to be hopeful!



Resources

Selective Mutism Association <https://www.selectivemutism.org>

Anxietycanada.com (search 'selective mutism' for all resources)

<https://anxietycanada.com/disorders/selective-mutism/>

Video: Selective Mutism: Giving Kids a Voice with Dr. Annie Simpson:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=C_qeJWkkwHU&feature=youtu.be



Questions for the speakers?

Please use the “Q&A” icon

Thank-you for joining.

Contact the Kelty Mental Health
Resource Centre:

e-mail: keltycentre@cw.bc.ca

phone (toll-free): 1-800-665-1822

