

PARENT AUTHORED ADVICE

Subject: SM Spaces

One word: 'Spaces'.

We all have them. Call them 'comfort zones', 'safe places', 'body space' whatever you like. One person chose to call them 'spaces' in order to try and explain a concept to other people. The concept is about human nature. It's about self-defence. It's about nurture and support. It should not be about anxiety or invasion.

Explaining something which is difficult is sometimes a difficult task. As a basketball coach this dad used a basketball metaphor to achieve his goal. Your body space is sacred on a basketball court. In theory any contact is a foul, and 5 fouls in one game and you're not allowed to play anymore.

In this document this dad tries to convey the message about spaces in relation to Selective Mutism (SM). Anyone with SM, even the youngest person has their own space. But with SM your space is threatened. Your anxiety levels are excessive many things can lead to increased anxiety, which in turn, and for those with SM, leads to a failure to communicate.

In order to overcome this, the spaces concept tries to help build and manage new, safe, comfortable spaces for those needing them. Over time, and the more spaces that exist, the concept says, that person with SM should be less anxious, and therefore more able to communicate. Speech generalisation comes when many spaces are 'talking spaces'.

Read the document, and then think. Have you got spaces? Can you build a space for someone else or are you a space invader?

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SM Spaces

This is what I understood about what my daughter (MissT) needed once we had the diagnosis for SM aged 5 and a half. The Ed.Psych said SM was like a pressure cooker with the lid on. With a pressure cooker you want to control the steam to cook the food, and release it once the food is cooked. This obviously doesn't work with SM, because you need to let out the pressure to speak ... The other problem is that if you just let the steam out, it dissipates, it is not useful anymore and it disappears.

What I understood that day was that yes, we could take off the pressure to speak, but we also had to put in place something where MissT could relax outside of her 'pressure cooker'. Let her out if you want, but give her a 'space' where she was free of pressure. At the same time I had the SMRM¹ book and decided to follow instructions (so to speak). For me that meant two things:

1. Release the pressure
2. Create her space

Her space would be somewhere where she was relaxed, but somewhere where she could learn to speak. The space needs structure, needs planning, needs looking after, and needs to grow with her. The SMRM book says 'treat the SM where it occurs' ... so her space was for me, always going to be at school, but school obviously had to agree.

We had the planning meeting, I explained my idea, and school agreed. The primary teacher would take off any pressure to speak to him, and the SENCo would do the sliding-in. MissT was unaware of the plan ... she was happy to slide, and off she went.

As parents, I also discussed with my ex- that 'we' had to take off the pressure at home. We should never discuss 'talking', never ask 'how was your day' etc etc ... wait for her ... it's a risk, because she might never tell us anything ...

The plan worked. She's now talking ... She's now a 'shy' 11 year old.

¹ Selective Mutism Research Manual, (Johnson & Wintgens, Speechmark 2001)

What I do now is that I continue to manage her space. She has a space with her mum 'at home', and she has a space at my house with her little brother and sister me and my partner. She has 'school' as a space, she does sleepovers, she travels by bus, swims, rides her bike, all spaces which I slid her into ... graded exposure ... no pressure to dive in, no pressure to get that bus ...

One space leads to another. Spaces merge:

- School merges with home : homework
- School merges with friends : Sleepovers and so on

The idea I guess is that everything merges to become 'MissT' at the end ... she will live her life in her space! I'm very careful even now to talk to her like this. She does NOT have to grow up because I say so! She will grow up, fall over, learn and advance through life, not with me telling her how to make every move, but on her own because she has learned to live in her space. If needed I'll slide her into another space ... whatever that may be: job, work experience, college, relationships ...

The opposite is also true, as with anything in life. If someone is in your space, they might be welcome or they might not be. The bad guys can be called space invaders. We all know them, they wake you up when you're asleep, they ask you to do things you can't do, they put pressure on you do things you can't do and worst of all they invade your space.

Changes can happen to spaces, they can happen to you. You can move into a new space, a school, a new house, you can migrate to a new country. Are those new spaces good for you? Are those old spaces full of bad memories? Would you go back to a bad space? The concept can be turned forever.

The idea is to exist in anxiety-free spaces.

The plan is to make them. Can you build a space on your own? A Do-it-yourself space? Do you need someone to help you? Do the people around you understand spaces? Is the person you know that has SM in a happy space? Are they communicating in that space? Can you help them make a space bigger? Can you help them make a new space?

Space, they say, is limitless, so are 'SM spaces'. Go create one ...

Appendix

References

Glossary

SM – Selective Mutism

SMRM – Selective Mutism Resource Manual

SENCo – Special Educational Needs Coordinator (in-School role)

Bibliography