Important Considerations for Therapy:

- Use lots of positive reinforcement - find many reasons to praise the child, and use specific praise. Look for even the smallest attempts at interaction or “brave” moments, such as handing a piece of paper to you, making eye contact with a peer, raising a hand, etc.

- Use specific praise like “Great job handing me that piece of paper”, which makes it clear what the child did right and increases the chances they will do it again, rather than vague praise like “Good job.”

- Provide a lot of wait time - give at least 5, even up to 10, seconds of wait time after asking a question or when waiting for a response from the child. Although it feels “too long” by typical pragmatic standards, children with SM often require additional time to work up the courage to respond, or may first need to practice the response in their head before saying it out loud. Be expectant, but comfortable with the wait time. Expectant wait time allows children to begin learning “distress tolerance”, or the ability to sit with the discomfort of an expectant pause and eventually progress through it.

- Build in as many opportunities for success as possible - find a level the child is successful at and give them as many opportunities to practice that skill as you can. The goal of therapy is to create new habits and patterns, and the best way to do this is through repeated practice. For example, if the child is able to answer forced-choice questions, ask dozens of forced-choice questions, even if it seems silly or over-the-top. Every time they communicate successfully, it strengthens the link between speaking and positive outcomes, and helps the child feel successful and capable.

- Have an organized, logically progressing plan for each individual therapy session and the overall trajectory of your sessions. Students should be able to progress in levels of language complexity both throughout individual sessions and overall, across many sessions. The number of levels covered in a session will vary depending on the child’s comfort and current skills, but aim to move through at least 2 levels each session. Always start therapy 1-2 levels before the goal level for that session, to allow time for warm-up and to build confidence before increasing the task difficulty.

Factors:

Children with selective mutism are very sensitive to changes in many variables. As such, a number of factors can affect the child’s ability to speak in a given situation. In therapy, it’s important to be very intentional about which variables you are changing and which are staying the same. Aim to change only one variable at a time. So, if you are changing the people in the room (i.e., having a new peer present during a session), then everything else should stay the same - work in a familiar room, do a familiar easier activity that the child has been successful with before, expect a lower level of language complexity. If you are expecting a higher level of language complexity, then the room, the people, and the activity should all be the same as previous sessions, and so forth. Some factors to consider when planning therapy are:
Levels of Language Complexity and Activity Ideas:

Children will progress through these levels of complexity within and across sessions. Within a session, plan to start a few levels before the level you are hoping they will achieve - i.e., if your goal is for the student to use carrier phrases, start with nonverbal or non-word sounds first to warm up, then move to single words, then to carrier phrases. As sessions progress, students should be able to move up to more complex levels until they are able to communicate spontaneously. Once spontaneity is achieved, other factors such as the environment or people can be changed (see above). Remember that as soon as another factor is changed, the expected level of language complexity should be lowered to something that the child can definitely be successful at.

- **Nonverbal responses (pointing, nodding)**
  - Any receptive language task
  - Give four pictures and have them point to the one that goes with the word/sentence you said
  - Following directions with manipulatives or coloring

- **Non-word sounds (animal sounds, sound effects)**
  - Play with toy cars and make sounds of cars driving or horns honking
  - Play with toy animals, stuffed animals, or puppets and make the accompanying animal sound
  - Have the child pretend to be an animal or object and make the sound, and you guess what it is

- **Single words**
  - Label pictures of familiar items (toys, animals, everyday objects)
  - Play “memory” games and have the child state the picture on each card as it’s turned over
  - Play Bingo or Zingo and have the child state the name of the objects they have, or state the name of the object/picture they want

- **Carrier phrases (“I have a…, I see a…”)**
  - Candyland - during each turn state “I got green, I got orange, I got purple”, etc
  - Uno - during each turn, state the number you are putting down “I have a two,” etc
  - Use hidden picture scenes and take turns finding an item and telling the group and then coloring it - “I see a cow,” “I see a broom,” etc
  - Go fish (use matching pictures for younger students) - practice using the same handful of phrases - “Do you have a ___?” “Yes, I have a ___” “No, go fish”

- **Descriptions**
Use picture scenes of familiar, everyday events and have children describe what's happening. Start by expecting a phrase or single sentence and move up to expecting multiple sentences.

Use “what's wrong?” or “what's missing?” pictures for added complexity and creativity.

Use a barrier (this can be as simple as standing up a three ring binder between you and the student so you can't see what's on the table in front of them) and have children describe a picture and you guess what it is, or you draw it on a whiteboard/paper while they describe the shapes/sizes/etc.

Use a “mystery bag” and have students reach in and feel an object and describe what it feels like, making guesses about what it may be.

- **Forced choice questions**
  - These questions elicit verbal responses, compared to yes/no questions which often only elicit a nonverbal response. Forced choice questions have possible answers included in the question, making them more predictable and accessible for students who are just starting to answer questions verbally. The question itself provides a model of an answer. For example, you can ask, “Do you want a yellow or a green or something else?” and wait for the child to respond.

- **Open-ended questions** (“What color do you want?”)

- **Spontaneous comments**
  - Do something silly or wrong and see if the child will correct you
  - Have the child explain how to do a task or play a game

- **Spontaneous questions**
  - Ask the child to do a task but “forget” to give them all the materials needed (i.e., need to cut out shapes but don’t have scissors, ask them to sit down but there are no chairs in the room, etc)
  - Use a “mystery bag” to ask questions about what is in the bag to get more information

**Resources:**

- [https://childmind.org/topics/disorders/selective-mutism/](https://childmind.org/topics/disorders/selective-mutism/) - good resource for parents and teachers, good overview of SM

- [https://childmind.org/guide/teachers-guide-to-selective-mutism/](https://childmind.org/guide/teachers-guide-to-selective-mutism/) - this one is specifically geared towards teachers

- [https://www.selectivemutism.org/sample-page/im-an-educator/](https://www.selectivemutism.org/sample-page/im-an-educator/) - direct teachers to this site or just give them snippets of information, like the ones about opportunities to help kids talk