Non-Verbal Communication

Children with autism have a difficult time understanding non-verbal communication. Tone of voice, eye-contact, voice inflection, facial expressions and gestures are often lost. Instead, they may hear only the literal interpretation of the words others say. Because most of the meaning of our communication is conveyed through non-verbal communication, children and teens with autism are often lost or confused during conversations. We communicate information in nonverbal ways using groups of behaviors. For example, we might combine a frown with crossed arms and unblinking eye gaze to indicate disapproval.

Besides not understanding others non-verbal communication, they also don't use non-verbal methods when talking to someone. The way others interpret their non-verbal communication is not usually an accurate interpretation of what the child is or is not communicating.

1. **Facial Expression** - Facial expressions are responsible for a huge proportion of nonverbal communication. Consider how much information can be conveyed with a smile or a frown.

2. **Gestures** - Deliberate movements and signals are an important way to communicate meaning without words. Common gestures include waving, pointing, and using fingers to indicate numeric amounts. Other gestures are arbitrary and related to culture.

3. **Paralinguistics** - Paralinguistics refers to vocal communication that is separate from actual language. This includes factors such as tone of voice, loudness, inflection and pitch. Consider the powerful effect that tone of voice can have on the meaning of a sentence. When said in a strong tone of voice, listeners might interpret approval and enthusiasm. The same words said in a hesitant tone of voice might convey disapproval and a lack of interest.

4. **Body Language and Posture** - Posture and movement can convey a great deal on information. Arm-crossing, leg-crossing, hunching, these nonverbal behaviors can indicate feelings and attitudes.

5. **Proxemics** - People often refer to their need for "personal space," which is also an important type of nonverbal communication. The amount of distance we need and the amount of space we perceive as belonging to us is influenced by a number of factors including social norms, situational factors, personality characteristics and level of familiarity.

6. **Eye Gaze** - Looking, staring and blinking can also be important nonverbal behaviors. Looking at another person can indicate a range of emotions, including hostility, interest and attraction.
7. **Haptics** - Touching as a tool of nonverbal communication. The various forms of touching that can be included in non-verbal communication includes handshakes, holding hands, kissing, back patting, high fives or even brushing an arm.

8. **Appearance** - Our choice of color, clothing, hairstyles and other factors affecting appearance are also considered a means of nonverbal communication.

Although children with autism may not ever be completely comfortable with the non-verbal portions of a conversation, you can help them better use and understand non-verbal communication.

**Play Charades** - use short sentences or stories that convey emotion, such as "I saw the dog coming toward me and I was afraid." You can add that you can use sounds and actions to act out the sentence or story but no words are allowed. This helps the child look at the body language and non-verbal cues to gain understanding about what is happening.

**Watch videos** - watch videos the child enjoys but doesn’t know by heart. Stop the video and talk about what the characters are doing and feeling. Discuss how the non-verbal communication helps you know what a person is feeling and guess what they will do next.

**Use video monitoring** - tape some social interactions between your child and other children. Watch the video and talk about different types of non-verbal communication, having your child pay attention to facial expressions, voice inflections and gestures. Discuss how paying attention to what the other person didn’t say can add different meanings to the words.

**Create a facial expression book** - you can cut out pictures from magazines, showing different facial expressions and create a book with many different "looks." For example, you might use "happy" and have several different faces showing how people show they are happy.

**Matching emotions** - cut out pictures of different emotions so that you have 2 pictures for each. Paste each picture on one side of an index card. Place all index cards face down. You and your child take turns turning over two cards and trying to make a match, such as two pictures denoting angry or two pictures showing someone who is scared or happy. If you find a match, you keep the cards, if the cards don't match, you turn them back over and the next person takes a turn. If you are teaching your child words, you can create one card with the word and your child must find the matching picture.

**Repeat phrases** - use simple phrases, such as "I am on the swings" and use different voice inflections and facial expressions to show how that phrase can mean different things. For example, you might say it in an excited voice or a scared voice. Have your child practice saying statements in different ways.
Go people watching - take an afternoon and head to the mall. Pick a spot to sit where you can easily watch the people walking by. Discuss what you think they might be feeling, based on their gestures and facial expressions. Take turns, giving your child lots of opportunities to watch how people act and with one another.

Practice and repetition will best help your child not only understand non-verbal communication, but to be able to use it effectively.
Receptive and Expressive Communication

Receptive language is the ability to UNDERSTAND language. Receptive language is responding to the language of others. The ability to follow directions and identify things are examples of receptive language. Receptive language is easier for individuals because they do not have to recall words. When asked a question or given a demand, the individual points to an object or picture. Even reading is a receptive skill. When the individual reads the word cat, they need to understand what the word cat is.

Expressive language is the ability to COMMUNICATE language. This does not have to be just verbally. It can be done with sign language or a communication device. Even writing is a form of expressive language. Expressive language involves making requests, giving information, and labeling things. Expressive language is more difficult because the individual has to recall the word or words they want to communicate and then be able to express. A lack of expressive language skills is often the cause of frustration and maladaptive behavior.

Sometimes receptive and expressive language skills can seem very similar or are confused. Receptive language is identifying, and expressive language is recalling the word and communicating it. Below are some examples of each.

- Letters (or any other rote skill)
  - Receptive-Point to the letter S. The individual points the S on the table.
  - Expressive-What letter is this? The individual says or signs S.
- Positions
  - Receptive-The individual is told to touch the dog on the box. They touch the dog on the box.
  - Expressive-Where is the dog? The individual says on the box.
- What says moo-
  - Receptive-the individual points to the cow on the table. The cow serves as a prompt to answer the question.
  - Expressive-the individual says the word cow, signs the word cow, goes through their communication device and finds the word or picture of the cow.
Behavior is a common occurrence in children, but more often in children with special needs. This is often a part of their diagnosis. It is usually caused by a characteristic of their diagnosis and not necessarily directly caused by the diagnosis. For example, a non-verbal child with autism may tantrum when he wants a drink. The tantrum behavior is not a symptom of autism, but it is a cause from the child not being able to communicate they want a drink (characteristic of autism). Behaviors can take many forms—aggressions, tantrums, self-injury, bolting, self-stimulation. It is important to teach the child appropriate ways to deal with the behavior and not make the behavior functional. For example if the child tantrums to avoid doing work you can teach them to request a break. If they have a tantrum at work time it is very important to make them do some of the task. It is important to gain an understanding of why the behavior is occurring to know the best strategy to handle it (more info on how to do this coming soon).

There are four functions of behavior.

- Self-stimulatory (sensory input)
- Escape/avoid a task or demand
- Get something they want
- Get attention

Escape

Children will exhibit behaviors in order to escape something or get out of doing something. Behaviors can vary greatly. They may tantrum when you ask them to do work or in a over-stimulating environment they want to leave. Typical children (and teenagers) will exhibit behaviors when you ask them to do a chore in order for you to stop asking them to do it. As with all behaviors it is important to stay consistent and follow through with what they were asked to do. You do not have to expect they entire thing, but they must at least do some of the task without behaviors. Each time make them do a little bit more.

Gain something

This is a common cause of behavior in young children and children with special needs. When an individual is unable to communicate what they want it leads to extreme frustration causing behaviors. The easiest way to deal with this is to develop a communication system for the child—special needs or not. Simple picture boards in a book to make a choice are easy to make and use. Have your child practice asking for things by using the book and encourage them to use the book
every time they get something so they make a connection. If the behaviors are due to a communication issue it is crucial, once they have calmed down, to have them communicate what they want and then give it to them. The faster they learn to communicate what they want, the faster the behaviors will decrease.

Another cause is not being allowed to have something they want. If a child asks for some candy and are told no they can become upset and exhibit behaviors. This is due to frustration of being denied what they want. If you give a child what they ask for when they are exhibiting behaviors they are very likely to exhibit behavior every time they are told “no”. It is important to teach your child to handle hearing the word “no”. This can be done by reinforcing them for not exhibiting behaviors when you say “no” using an alternative reinforcer.

Get attention

Children can exhibit behaviors in order to gain attention from an adult or peers. This may be caused by a lack of ability to appropriately interact. Children also may associate some type of social activity with you that they act up in order for you to interact with them. Any kind of attention either when they are doing something good or getting in trouble is still reinforcing for the child. It is important to not give them verbal interaction if this is the cause. Do not make eye contact and redirect them to what they are suppose to be doing. Reinforce frequently for doing what they are suppose to be doing and not attend to them when they are exhibiting this behavior. Sometimes this means leaving the room or turning your back to the child and working with someone else.

Self-stimulatory

Self-stimulatory behavior is different than the other three. The others involve tantrums, self-injury, and aggression. Self-stimulatory behavior is a bit different. It can involve vocals, hand/arm flapping, jumping, rocking. Although they may seem harmless, they are not socially acceptable and it can interfere with other activities. It is important to reinforcer the child for NOT exhibiting the behavior, also blocking the behavior when it occurs. These behaviors can happen often when the child is bored it is important to keep your child engaged in activities.

In order to best treat behaviors it is best to understand why the behavior is occurring. It is best to think about what happened immediately before the before and treat it accordingly. It is also crucial to reinforcer for appropriate behaviors whenever possible.