



RESEARCH BRIEF

Enhancing Communication in Nonverbal Children with Autism

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Autism presents itself as a cluster of behaviors rather than a single clear symptom that can be diagnosed as autism. The severity of the behaviors associated with autism varies greatly. Some children with autism are quite verbal and able to express their needs, while other children are nonverbal and may have considerable difficulty making their needs understood.

This chapter focuses on children who are nonverbal and considered at lower levels of functioning.

Nonverbal children with autism often withdraw from social situations. Their emotions can be limited to extremes such as crying, screaming, and laughing profusely. Many are resistant to change in their daily routines. Some unusual behaviors may also be present, but these behaviors vary in degree and frequency among nonverbal children.

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Communication is a social act between two or more people where one person is relaying information and the other person is receiving the information and in turn responds back to the initiator.

There are several behaviors that nonverbal children need to have in order to be effective "communicators."

They must understand that there is a cause and effect relationship when communicating desires and needs.

For example, if they hand you a picture of a cookie, they will get a cookie.

Nonverbal children also need to have a desire to communicate with another person as well as a means to communicate since speech is not an option.

The following is a list of alternative communication systems used to facilitate nonverbal children's communication and a brief explanation of each.

Sign Language

While a major advantage of using sign language is that the child can sign anywhere, this method of communication also has limitations. In order for a child to communicate effectively with sign language, they need to have a good model. In other words, the parent and/or teacher needs to be proficient in sign. Because there is a limited population familiar with sign language, the child may experience frustration when he/she is attempting to communicate and is not understood.

Utilizing Objects for Communicative Exchange

The child is taught that when they want something they must go retrieve the object that represents what it is they want. The object is given to someone who can fulfill the desire of the child. Pictures for Communicative Exchange— Instead of using objects, the child uses pictures to represent what they want. They might hand a picture of a cracker to their teacher to indicate that they want crackers. It is important when using pictures to communicate to include a word on the picture card so children will be exposed to writing and know that words are functional.

Reading and Computers for Communication

All children should be exposed to print early and this can be a successful means of communicating. There are also computer devices that provide the child with a "voice". At first the children are usually interested in the cause and effect relationship of pushing a button and the device speaks back. However, many children with autism can be taught to use the device for functional communication.

Facilitated Communication

The nonverbal child is assisted in their communication by having someone support their hand while pressing a button that provides a "voice" or helping stabilize their finger while they spell out a word on a board with letters. The physical assistance is gradually decreased over time, and the child is encouraged to communicate independently.

Alternative methods of communication can greatly help nonverbal children with autism communicate their needs and desires. The challenge is to determine which type of alternative communication best fits with the child.

