

Connecting meaningfully with people who are nonverbal or have limited verbal abilities and especially those with an associated intellectual disability, is a topic close to my heart, and closely linked to my personal and professional life.

Some individuals are nonverbal from childhood, like my son on Level 3 Autism. Others can lose their ability to communicate due to an accident or illnesses, during different stages of their life and then many experience a gradual decline in their communication and cognition due to dementia, especially into their senior years; for people over 80, the incidence is about 1 in 4, and for those with intellectual disabilities, it may begin as early as in their early forties.

Humans are naturally wired for connection, and lacking it can cause distress, much like physical pain. Because social interaction so often relies on speech, those who cannot speak can feel anxious or insecure, especially during transitions or changes in their daily routine, while experiencing new places or people, and if their main companions or caregivers are missing.

Those of us who communicate verbally often overlook nonverbal cues. Yet, by spending even half an hour of quiet time with a nonverbal individual, for a few days, we can learn to notice and interpret these signs and respond knowingly for creating a more meaningful bond.

Observing Body Language and Expressions

Paying close attention to body language is essential. Notice how someone typically sits and looks around or reaches out, and notice any changes in their specific ways, especially when they are upset. As these signs could be the only way some of the nonverbals can communicate their needs and feelings. It is also important to remember the correct way of observation. Instead of a steady gaze, which could be a little overwhelming for many on the spectrum, try to use a more subtle approach and peripheral vision. Key points to notice are:

- If there's a smile, frown, or a certain tilt of the head, which can signal their mood.
- Body Movements such as a twitch, scratch, head bob, or tapping toes may reveal how they might be feeling.
- Reaching out for a touch, hand shake/fist bump or turning away as you enter a room are very meaningful signs and could suggest a comfortable distance for interaction.
- Eye contact matters. Do they quickly glance at you, use peripheral vision, maintain a friendly stare or using a glare, which could indicate an urgent need, or they could just be focused on what you might be carrying in your hands, instead of you?

- There could be a certain rhythmic body movements when calm or enjoying an activity and losing that interest when anxious.
- Some manifest a facial or a hand twitch or another specific action when seemingly anxious or confused.

Listening to Vocalizations

Many individuals who have been nonverbal since birth, use specific vocalizations, like clicks, grunts, sighs, squeals, or humming. These sounds often express emotions or requests. Notice changes in tone, pitch, or rhythm; absence of their usual sounds can also signal a change in feeling.

Understanding Cues for Yes and No:

Facial expressions can indicate agreement or disagreement:

- For “No” or “I don’t like that,” a person might crumple their face or avoid eye contact.
- For “Yes” or approval, expect lifted eyes, a raised head, or a bright smile.

Making Choices:

Some may use their eyes to “point” at objects or choices. You can use pictures of places, feelings, or objects and ask them to “show me with your eyes.”

Responding Thoughtfully

By observing these visual and vocal cues and responding appropriately, you can build trust. Patience is crucial, as progress may be slow, but every step toward understanding is worth celebrating. Value every attempt at 2-way communication, however small. When you do, you reassure them that their feelings and choices matter.

Encouraging Natural Expression

Helping someone extend their natural ways of expression is about respect and dignity. Like for the person who seems to understand simple gestures, start signing for 4-5 basic words, (examples) for Yes. No. More. Drink. Go. And observe his/her response.

This encouragement will indicate that you see and hear them and are trying to connect with them in their way. This will motivate them to be more expressive.

As a real meaningful interaction connects hearts and minds and doesn’t always need words.

Final Thoughts

Our eyes and ears can only observe what our minds are trained to notice. With self awareness and attention, our interactions become richer, more thoughtful, and truly meaningful. Celebrate every moment of connection, and remember that meaningful communication is possible without words, if you know what to look for, how to listen, feel and encourage growth.