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BODY TALK: LEARNING TO SPEAK NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

Wade is a bright young man who has received an excellent education. However, he has not been able to find employment or make friends because of his difficulties in reading other's body language and responding appropriately. Wade says, "I took language in school, but they never taught me to listen with my eyes and talk with my body."

For many individuals with autism, the nonverbal aspects of communication are a foreign language. Over 50% of what we communicate is a foreign language. Over 50% of what we communicate is through facial expressions and body movements. We often assume that children will learn to express themselves spontaneously by watching and imitating others. Instead we need to plan direct instruction, practice, trials in social settings with feedback, and structured guidance systems to teach nonverbal communication.

Instruction begins with learning to read the body talk of other individuals by looking at pictures, videos, clips from TV shows, or live observations and progresses to learning to speak this language. Students can watch a specific person and report on what he/she expressed with his/her face and body. They may role play an individual and practice varying responses with changing contexts. In the Mirror Game, one individual is asked to model the other's expression and body language. This activity works well when the pair are in the center of the circle and given positive support by the rest of the group. Students can practice reading body language by watching TV with the sound turned down. Every few minutes, they can turn up the sound and see if their interpretations of the interactions were correct. For example, watching soap operas with the sound off would be an opportunity to make guesses about characters' relationships and intents from nonverbal expressions. Another activity that can increase awareness is videotaping themselves and analyzing their own use of nonverbal gestures. These activities work best in small groups that include some peers who are skilled readers of body language. They are most successful when there is an atmosphere of fun and flexibility. Group members must feel comfortable to try on new expressions and know that they can't fail. Scripts and routines for specific social situations may be practiced as part of the group's activities, but no memorized routine can beat learning to read and speak the nonverbal language.

Elements of nonverbal language

Facial expressions show the emotion behind the words. We tend to think of smiles as positive, but there are many different kinds of smiles: polite smiles, relaxed smiles, laughing smiles, and even cruel smiles. We need to look at other features also. Are the eyebrows raised in a questioning or skeptical expression? Is the forehead wrinkled in worry? Is the chin set in tension or determination? Is the skin flushed in embarrassment or anger?

Eye language is especially important. American culture regards looking a person in the eye as an indicator of attention (I am listening to you) and of honesty (I have nothing to hide). Yet constant intense eye contact is considered impolite or even aggressive. We look and let our eyes slide away. We look for longer periods when the other is talking than when we are speaking. The eyes mirror a great deal of feeling in subtle ways, whether open wide or squinting, twinkling with laughter, glowering with anger, or becoming red and watery with sadness.

While the facial expression tells how a person is feeling, the rest of the body usually indicates how the person is coping with those feelings. Are the fists clenched in a menacing manner? Is the person moving and fidgeting nervously? Does the entire body appear relaxed? Body movements can also serve as illustrators and regulators. Illustrators are nonverbal movements that accompany and illustrate verbal communication. You say, "I want that one," and point.

People reveal a lot about themselves by the way they sit, stand and walk. Holding oneself relaxed and erect is often interpreted as confidence, while hunching over is seen as lack of self-esteem, sadness or even depression. Excessive rigidity can indicate formality or tension. When people give you their attention, they usually turn and face you squarely. Often they lean your direction and sometimes without intending, they usually turn and face you squarely. Often they turn your direction and sometimes without intending, they mirror your posture. When a person turns or leans away, this often indicates disinterest or a desire to get away.

Pay attention to the unspoken rules of social zones of proximity. In American culture, our intimate zone is 6 to 8 inches or closer to our body and includes touching. We reserve this area for family and close friends. If someone who is not family touches you or gets in your intimate zone, they usually apologize or say "Excuse me." If we are forced together with strangers such as on an elevator or bus, we usually don't make eye contact. Our personal zone is like a bubble one and a half to two and a half feet around us. We feel comfortable talking to friends in this space. People we don't know well are kept at a social distance of 4 to 12 feet. It feels uncomfortable if people are in the wrong zone. Too close may feel disrespectful and invasive, while too far away may feel inattentive or standoffish.

No **gesture**, in and of itself has a specific meaning. It is a part of a pattern best understood in its context. It is important to note discrepancies between words and expressions and gestures. When a person says, "I am your friend," but his/her mouth and eyes appear to have a sneering unkind look, you are best to trust the nonverbal language over the words. When a person smiles at you, but his/her body language is stiff and he/she moves away, take the incongruity as a clue that the smile may not be sincere. It is important to practice reading other people and then check your reactions for their accuracy. Often we get a "feeling" about a person that comes from an aspect of their body language. With practice, our ability to read people and trust our feeling about them becomes an important interpersonal skill.

Strategies for teaching the understanding and use of body language skills

Persons with autism display deficits in Theory of Mind (ToM) and Central Coherence. An intact Theory of Mind allows the individual to guess what the communication partner is thinking, then to tailor his own responses to that. Intact Central Coherence allows an individual to see the whole picture and guess the details, or to see the details of a situation and guess the whole picture. With deficits in these two areas, the person with autism is "mind blind" and "context blind". It'll be necessary to directly instruct these skills across environments and people.

Instruction begins with learning to read the body talk of other individuals by looking at pictures, videos, clips from TV shows, or live observations, and progresses to learning to speak this language.

- Students can watch a specific person and report on what he/she expressed with his/her face and body.
- They may role play an individual (similar to acting a part) and practice varying responses with changing contexts.
- In the Mirror Game, one individual is asked to model the other's expression and body language. This activity works well when the pair is in the center of the circle and given positive support by the rest of the group.

Structured guidance in applying body language skills

After they have some awareness and skills training in body language, many individuals with autism still benefit from having a structured guide or Social Story to prompt them to observe body language. Here is one story that you may adapt according to age, interest and functioning level:

'I am the great message detective. I observe people to find clues to decode their message. I look first at their eyes, and their face. This gives clues to how they are feeling. I look at the way they are holding their body and the movements that they made with their hands and arms. I see if they stand close or distant. This gives me clues to what they are doing with their emotions. I, the great detective, consult my incredible message decoder in my brain, for an answer. Then in a flash, I choose how to respond, if they are safe and friendly, I may mirror their behavior or express myself. If I am not sure, I may be reserved and inquire further. If there appears to be danger, I go into the protect-and-retreat mode. After I respond and observe the reaction, I reflect on the success of my communication. I am the great message detective. I observe people.'

Sigafoos, J., O'Reilly, de la Cruz, B. (2007). [How To Use Video Modeling and Video Prompting](#). Austin, TX: PRO-ED, Inc. ISBN: 1-4164-0152-0.

[Mind Reading: The Interactive Guide to Emotions](#). Software package. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd. (2007).

Smith Myles, B., Trautman, M., Schelvan, R. (2004). [The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations](#). Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co. (AAPC) ISBN: 1-931282-60-9.

Books to help teach nonverbal language skills:

Bolton, R. (1979). People skills. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Castle, S. (1977). Face talk, hand talk, body talk. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.

Desmond, M. (1995). Body talk: The meaning of human gestures. New York, NY: Crown Trade Paperbacks.

Fast, J. (1970). Body language. New York, NY: MJF Books.

Fast, J. (1994). Body language in the workplace. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Marshall, E. (1983). Eye language: Understanding the eloquent eye. New York, NY: New Trend.

McGough, E. (1974). Your silent language. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.

Niernenberg, G.I., & Calero, H.H. (1993). How to read a person like a book. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble.

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