



Bridging the Communication Gap: Effective therapy for non-verbal individuals with ASD

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Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are among the most interesting and challenging people that you will meet as a speech-language pathologist – they are also among the most misunderstood and underestimated. Standardized tests are woefully inadequate tools to accurately measure the intellectual capabilities and future learning potential of a less verbal person with ASD. Psychological and educational tests rely heavily on verbal language ability – who can successfully complete a testing task when they don't understand the instructions and can't articulate the answers? The artificially low estimate of intellect provided by standardized testing batteries leads well-meaning therapists and educators to have inappropriately low expectations of the learning capacity of low-verbal and non-verbal ASD individuals. When those individuals fail to do well, fail to develop communication skills and fail to learn at school, we don't fault the therapy or educational approach, we say that the person with ASD was just not capable. We couldn't be more wrong.

Recently published first-person accounts by non-verbal persons with ASD highlight the fact that verbal output is a poor indicator of intellectual functioning in this population. Tito and Amanda are two non-verbal ASD individuals who are able to use written language to reveal mature intellectual capabilities, far above what people would predict from listening to their limited spoken language. The challenge for therapists is to bridge the severe communication gap and teach to the true level of intellect.

To be successful with this population, you need to first make the world a tolerable and comprehensible place. For young children with severe autism, the outside world is an overwhelming jumble of sight, sound, smell, taste and texture, and they are one raw screaming over-exposed nerve. Other people add another layer of frightening and unpredictable chaos. Autism, at the heart, is a problem of human interaction – the child's neurology and physiology is making it almost impossible for them to be with you, so you, as the neurologically capable adult, must do the changing, especially at the beginning.

You start by simplifying the physical environment until you reach a point of calm and connection. Then, you make yourself a tolerable communication partner by quieting down, slowing down, and ceasing your endless flow of chatter and body language. Find something that the child likes and will approach voluntarily – make a simple interaction and move outwards from there. The primary goal of initial therapy sessions is to convince the child that allowing other people into their world can be tolerable, interesting, and eventually more fun than being on their own.

You help the child understand how the world and people “work”. Visuals are effective because they “freeze” important information that usually blows by quickly in a blast of sound and light. If I have to look at a drawing for 3 weeks before it makes sense to me, the visual information will not decay – it will be the same on day 21 as it was on day 1. You may notice

a child is rewinding and watching the same 60 seconds of a videotape thousands of times – some would say “meaningless stim”, but in my experience, that rewinding child may be using the thousand perfect repeats to visually learn the details of cause and effect in the taped interaction. There's a reason for everything the kids do – it just may not be a reason that's known to you at that time.

You also need to open up a channel of expressive communication so that the child has a way to act on the world, make choices and express their own ideas and preferences. I find that initially, it helps to treat all behaviour as purposeful, especially since behaviour is often communication in young children with severe autism. The child begins to hum and rock and finger-flick. You notice that the background noise has gone up in volume. You say “Too loud?” and turn it down. Maybe you guessed right, and maybe you guessed wrong, but what you have shown the child is that their actions had an immediate effect on your actions; communication has taken place. If a child uses some clear non-verbal communication (e.g. pulls you to a desired item, blocks you from turning on an annoying toy), respond immediately to the intent. You might “map” a verbal language model over top (e.g. “Want this?” or “No?”), but don't require an extra verbal or picture-pointing output before you will respond. The kids are smart, they know you understood. This classic speech pathologist trick may momentarily extract a small piece of language behaviour, but you will cause frustration that will disrupt the interaction, and damage the child's confidence that you are a trustworthy “safe” communication partner.

Drawing is a very useful channel of expressive communication that I came upon by accident. Adam is an extremely bright boy who started off on the profoundly non-verbal end of the autism spectrum. When he was a small boy, therapy was short snippets of interaction around his house – sitting in truck inner tubes putting finger puppets on his toes, looking at picture books under blankets, playing with bouncy balls on the garden stairs. One day in desperation, wanting to both extend the interaction and encourage him to make sounds, I began to draw pictures that could match the sound approximations he was producing. It worked. He stayed in one spot and he tried out every sound he could think of so that I would draw more things. What I didn't know at the time was that every single picture I drew for that boy, from that moment on, was stored in his visual memory. I continued to draw for him, creating endless visual vignettes and stories to explain the world to him. More than 4 years later, when Adam was 8 years old, his motor abilities matured to the point that he was able to draw shapes on a large easel. He drew himself exactly as I had drawn him countless times. I was amazed and his expressive drawing took off from there.

Adam is now 18 years old, and his drawing is still his clearest form of expressive communication. Over the years, we have “piggy-backed” written language onto his drawings and the development of his written language has “pulled” his spoken language so that he now speaks in generally intelligible full sentences with some grammatical errors. At many times in his life, when he could not transmit a message using his words, drawing filled the gap and allowed him to tell us his perspective. Here is an example. When Adam was in junior school, a program was put in place to teach greetings. He panicked in the hallways and was very distressed when other students greeted him. We wanted to find out why he was upset, so I drew the first picture (setting up the situation) and he drew the next three unprompted:



The girl says “Hi” – the locker door slams. The third picture is, I think, the most interesting. It took us a little bit to figure out the perspective. That’s Adam hiding inside the locker looking out at the scary “greeting girl” through the locker vents. Note the clearly expressed emotion. At last, the girl gives up and Adam is relieved and free to leave.



Drawing by Adam

We didn’t know why the greeting interaction was so scary for him, but we respected the fact that it was and dropped the program. Interestingly, several years later, in high school, he spontaneously started to greet people. He was ready, the situation made sense to him, and most importantly, his perception had developed to the point where he could reliably tell one person from another.

Successful programming for non-verbal individuals with ASD is built on respect – respect for the person’s intellect, respect for the neurological and physiological differences that are making interaction difficult or impossible, respect for the fact that the individual has a valid perspective and a very good reason for every single thing that they do, respect for the incredible effort it takes to enter the larger world each day. As I said at the beginning, these are fascinating people. In the end, if you pay attention, you will learn more than you teach.