

Building Foundations for Communication

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in. --Rachel Carson



*Adults and children from all around our neighborhood walk to enjoy this fountain
Photo from [WATER](#)*

Reaching Out: We want to make interacting **easier** for the child who has autism and/or other difficulties interacting. We want to help the child connect with people. Positive, meaningful, non-verbal connections are the foundation for language development. Without establishing trusting relationships, this social piece to language development will be missing. When a child isn't motivated to interact and is, in fact, motivated to **AVOID** interaction -it is up to us to reach out with care and curiosity in hopes of discovering ways to increase interactive connections.

Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out –Vaclav Havel

The Foundation for Communication: Interaction skills begin with the ability to connect to one person. Getting into the flow of an interactive dance is easiest and most productive on an individual to individual basis. Group interaction is much more dynamic, and its too easy to lose the individual who is not yet successful at connecting one-on-one. If you want to build a foundation for language development, plan for some one-on-one time in which you will purposely:

1. **Follow the child's lead.** Since we do not know how the child is experiencing the world, this is the way we can learn.

Shifting Agendas When a child seems to be in his/her own world and unable to attend, we often wonder, "How can I get this child to pay attention to me?" or "How can I teach this child?" When interaction is impaired, and the child is not noticing you, more useful questions to ask yourself may be "What is this child attending to?" and "How can I connect?" This will help you let go of the need for the child to perform in order to please you. Instead you will be able to shift your agenda to seeing through the eyes of the child. Shift your agenda from focusing on what you do not have (the child's attention) to appreciating what you do have (the opportunity to learn about a human being experiencing the world differently than you).

Discovering Answers To find out what your child is attending to, observe and ask, "What's he/she doing?" The child's actions may seem meaningless to you, but trust that the child has his/her reasons. If you do not understand what your child is doing, that's okay. Your child is probably perplexed by you as well. We all try to avoid things that make us feel uncomfortable. Allow yourself to be

comfortable with the child just as he/she is -let go of feeling you need to change or teach him/her something "appropriate" all the time. This often gets in the way of connecting which would be more beneficial for increasing communications skills. The message you want to send is, "I want to understand, I'm trying."

A Moment of Breakthrough Following Jake's lead, we would often sit and stare silently at photos together. Often I had no clue why he was so interested in one particular image vs. another. I simply respected his hand stopping my hand from turning the page. I followed his gaze as best I could and would attempt to look at the photo of his interest with him. One day we spent about 15 minutes just looking quietly together at a picture of a clock. In my mind I'm wondering, "what is he thinking about -the numbers? The round shape? The concept of time?" I was surprised at all the possibilities that came to my mind from looking at one simple picture of a clock. Suddenly Jake says as clear as day "propeller." "Propeller?" I asked, and we made eye contact then looked back to the clock, and then it clicked to me, "OH, I see, you are right Jake! The hands of the clock go around like a propeller does!" Then I was able to extend our connection by finding more propeller photos for us to check out -an airplane, helicopter, fan, etc. The silent, non-interactive staring (by my joining him and making it a two person activity) developed into an exchange of information in which we learned about each other, we connected!

2. **Strive for Awareness and Balance.** Following the child's lead will also help the child develop awareness (as well as improve your own). When we lead before a child is able to respond, the reciprocal nature of interaction is neglected.

The Power of Interaction Before words, there are actions. Demonstrate to the child the power of his/her actions, so that you can build his/her understanding of the power of *words*. Acting as if non-verbal cues are communicating something to you by heightening your attention and responding through balanced actions automatically shifts a one person event to a two person event -**interaction!** Doing this makes it easier for a child to develop awareness of the power he/she has over another person.

Give What You Are Wanting By giving the child more influence over you, you can build a reciprocal relationship even before the child understands how to attend and respond to people. This *models* what you want the child to learn.

Let's look at three common challenges to interaction and what they mean in terms of communication:

Repetitive Behaviors: Random noises and/or phrases made repeatedly, pacing or spinning, playing with an object in the same way over and over, etc. are all a child's non-verbal way of saying "This is comforting to me" or "I'm trying to process this" or "this is what my body is doing, and I can't help it" - it could mean many things, we don't have to know exactly. We want our actions to say back, "OK." It is important that the behaviors are not looked at as purposeful annoyances to others and/or misbehaviors that need to be changed because they interfere with real learning*. Anytime these behaviors are prominent they can provide us with awesome opportunities to connect. Learning how to interact *is* learning! And it is *very* important. Use a playful, parallel approach by engaging in a similar activity to demonstrate your acceptance and interest in the child. This not only makes the child's influence on you visible to him/her, it also help him/her develop awareness of self. Like flicking a pencil or hair twirling, we all engage in actions that we may not be consciously aware of at times. I remember the first time Jake noticed I was flicking my fingers by my eyes like he was doing. He looked at me, and looked at his own hand holding his fingers still for a moment -he not only noticed the power over me I was giving him, he was also becoming more conscious of the power he has over himself.

(*note: sometimes if a child notices a powerful, negative reaction behaviors can become "button-pushing" and repeated just to get that same reaction. This will be discussed in more detail in a future chapter).

Avoidance Behaviors: Hiding, moving away, not making eye contact, etc. are all ways of saying "this is hard for me" or "I'm not comfortable" or "I need a break". Again, we don't need to know

exactly. Our actions can again say, "OK." We can demonstrate respect by giving them space, time, and reassurance that you're wanting to make things easier. You can parallel play and connect on the child's terms -from a distance and unobtrusively. Establishing comfort and trust may take time, but it's worth it.

Physical Behaviors: When a child hurts you physically, this is not what you are wanting. It is so important to look through the behavior to the deeper message. This non-verbal message can mean, "I'm in pain" or "I'm frustrated" or "This will get your attention!" Again, give what you want. The message to give back is, "Hurting me will not help." You want gentleness, patience, trust, respect. Speak softly and reassuringly. Give space but don't abandon. Offer assistance if you can see how to do so. This subject will be discussed in more detail later.



*Quench your thirst. Connect with the child through actions
Photo from [WATER](#)*

You can believe that water will keep you from dying of thirst, but unless you actually drink the water (put your belief into action), you will die of thirst. –Rev. Creflo Dollar

3. **Learn to mutually enjoy each other.** You can not force a child to feel that interacting with you is fun. Until a child experiences interaction as fun, he/she will avoid what does not feel easy or comfortable.

Inspiration and Motivation Inspiration can be thought of as a fire lit from within, but that fire can be fueled (encouraged) from an outside stimulus. On the other hand, motivation is usually thought of as an outside persuasion -most simply pain or pleasure. We either go towards more of what feels good or try to more strongly avoid that which doesn't feel good. Pretty clear which strategies would be most effective to build trust and deepen a relationship with a special child. We want to **inspire** and **use positive motivation** as much as we can!!!

Before the Breakthroughs At first Jake wouldn't even LET me look at the same picture as him in a book as he did in the clock/propeller story prior. When he would sit and stare at a photo I would attempt to sit near him and look too. He either turned away or got up and physically moved away from me. How did I respect his non-verbal cues and build a connection with him at the same time? I got my own book, sitting and staring at my own picture. At first he didn't usually notice right away, but when he looked up and did notice, I'd look up and smile at him. Then he'd come over and take my book! AH-HA!!! He was inspired to start interacting with me 😊 I'd celebrate with a "YAY! I LOVE that you're interested in my book!!" Then of course, I'd get another book to hopefully motivate another interactive moment. Hours of this type of exchange preceded the "propeller" breakthrough, and now I am almost always allowed to join Jake looking and even discussing whatever he is interested in looking at -and now he'll even come look at things I'm interested in showing him!

Learning To Play The first definition of play in my dictionary says, "To occupy oneself in amusement, sport, or other recreation." We can play with a child who doesn't play back by playing along side that child doing things he/she can do. Play is how children learn. Everyone can learn through playing. Play incorporates some spontaneity that is often built from a familiar base. You'll be building from what is already familiar to the child. Play can be sloppy or precise. Expand your perception of what play should look like. Allow a child to show you new ways. Allow yourself to enjoy new experiences. Drop expectations and enjoy things as they are.

Stay out of your ego...remember, we're not trying to get anywhere. We're just trying to be where we're at as fully as possible. – Bryan Krest

What it Looks Like OK, so it may look and feel odd at first. Who cares? If the child is not hurting him/herself or anyone else, everything he/she does can be viewed as an opportunity to connect given some thought and creativity. Words are powerful things simply because they *represent* the actions, feelings, and thoughts, and can eventually be used alone to express these. The development of language occurs within the context of relationships. Be willing to step out of your comfort zone, in order to encourage a child with special needs to do the same.

Does the child look at you? When he/she does, are you smiling? Why or why not?

The rest of this series will focus on using these foundational strategies as a holistic approach towards supporting interaction. This approach is not widely accepted yet, but if it speaks to you then you can help it become more so. All children benefit from love and support. That love and support may look different, depending on how a particular child is challenged. Each one is a unique individual with gifts to offer. You are too. You can help non-verbal children be heard.

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