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Nonverbal Communication: Teaching Your Child the Skills of Social Success

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Have you ever noticed that some children just don't fit in? They want to have good relationships with their peers, but somehow or another, they always end up feeling rejected. And the worst part is, they don't know why. They think they are being friendly, so the rejection comes as an unpleasant surprise.

Social rejection is extremely painful during any stage of life, but it may be especially so for elementary school aged children. In fact, studies show poor peer relationships may be related to a variety of difficulties including depression and/or the development of risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.

Several researchers have found that a common reason some children fail to develop good relationships with their peers is that they lack good communication skills. And, particularly problematic is a lack of nonverbal communication skills. In other words, children who are rejected—who don't fit in—tend to make lots of nonverbal mistakes. They stand too close, stay too long, interrupt others, hug people who don't want to be hugged, dress inappropriately for the occasion, and similar types of things.

If your child is one of the unlucky crowd who has difficulty fitting in with his or her peers, how can you tell if your child would benefit from help in developing his or her nonverbal communication skills? What kinds of activities can you share with your child to help him or her develop those skills?

What Is Nonverbal Communication?

It's important to understand that nonverbal communication is the language of relationships. It is in the way that we treat others, much more than in what we say to others, that lets them know whether they are liked or disliked, respected or disrespected, wanted or dismissed. And, there are different types of nonverbal messages and a grammar for understanding them that allows us to use and interpret nonverbal signals appropriately.

First, there are several channels or types of nonverbal communication. That is, we communicate with others using (a) facial expressions, such as happiness or anger, (b) space, such as standing close or being "stand-offish," (c) touch or lack of touch, (d) objectics, which includes the way we dress and

things we use to define ourselves, (e) time, such as rushing or always making others wait for us, and (f) paralinguistic, which includes the tone, intensity, or loudness of our voices.

Second, it is also important to know there is a grammar or set of rules for nonverbal behavior, just as there is for language. If people stand within arms' length, look us in the eye while talking, and smile when they look our way, we know we are liked. If people move away from us, avoid eye contact, and frown when they see us, we know we are disliked. But what happens when one person doesn't understand these rules? He or she may be sending messages that weren't intended or receiving messages that others didn't mean to send.

Assessing Your Child's Nonverbal Communication Skills

There are lots of ways to informally assess your child's nonverbal skills. In fact, you can easily make a game of it. For example, turn on a television program that your child enjoys (such as *Sesame Street* for preschoolers). Turn down the sound and ask your child to describe what is going on. Every once in a while, turn the sound up to see how accurate your child's descriptions are. While the sound is up, ask your child to turn his or her back to the television. Now, you can also assess your child's ability to understand paralinguistic by asking him or her to describe what's happening on the program. Similar activities can be done at the grocery store or the mall. Sit and watch people with your child, and ask him or her to describe what various people you see are thinking or feeling. If your child is able to describe others' feelings and actions well, you'll know that your child is good at receiving and interpreting others' messages.

To assess how well your children send appropriate nonverbal messages, you may simply observe them as they play with others, watch their favorite television programs, or engage in similar activities. If you can read their emotions, and their emotions are appropriate for the situation, then you'll know

that your children are pretty good at sending appropriate messages.

Building Your Child's Nonverbal Communication Skills

What if your child doesn't understand others' nonverbal messages or isn't good at sending clear nonverbal messages? There are lots of ways you can help your child improve his or her nonverbal communication skills by playing simple games. To help your child improve his or her understanding of nonverbal messages:

- Tell or "hum" a story without using words. Let changes in your voice convey excitement, fear, happiness, and so forth. Ask your child to describe what the story was about and discuss differences between your child's interpretations and your intended meanings.
- Watch television together and ask your child to observe the ways that actors use their eyes to convey meaning. Talk with your child about what differences in eye contact mean. For example, long and intense eye contact usually signals that something important is being said; prolonged looking away while talking may indicate dishonesty or disinterest.
- Look through magazines and cut out pictures of people wearing different types of clothing. Discuss with your child where each of these people is probably going, and what type of activity they might do when they get there. Also discuss where each type of outfit might be inappropriate and how people would react if someone showed up wearing it.
- Another fun activity helps to teach about postures, gestures, and emotions. Find some old magazines and ask your child to cut out pictures of people. After you have a selection of pictures, ask your child to identify what the people in each picture are feeling. You may also talk with your child about how he or she made those choices. A similar exercise may be done with pictures of faces.

To help your child improve his or her nonverbal sending abilities:

- Try having your child repeat a phrase (such as “I didn’t say you could go outside”) so that the phrase has different meanings. For example, place the emphasis on “I” so that the phrase means that someone else said it or place the emphasis on “you” so that the phrase means someone else was allowed to go outside.
- Ask your child to tell you a story without words, either by “humming” story as described above or by acting out the story.
- Ask your child to “make faces at you.” For example, have your child express happiness, anger, sadness, disgust, fear, and surprise by using facial expressions but not body movements.

Remember to praise your child when he or she correctly identifies or conveys emotions, and coach him or her when mistakes are made.

These are just some of the many things you can do to play with children while also improving their nonverbal communication abilities. Let your imagination run wild! You’ll think of many others, and you and your child will have fun while developing an important life skill.

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