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Non Verbal Communication

Often when we think of communication we think about words, speech, vocabulary and conversation. It's easy to forget, since we do it so naturally, that meaningful communication includes so much more than that. In fact, non verbal communication gives us over 70% of the information that we need when we are conversing with people. Non verbal communication is so valuable. We are able to notice what people are doing with their faces, body, and the way that they are say things to us as well as pay attention to the content of speech. In infants non verbal communication is their only method of communication. Very young infants will study their parents' faces for hours and learn to understand, through their experiences, the meanings of what their parents are portraying. Children become masters in non verbal communication before they gain their first word.

I'm going to breakdown non verbal communication into the smaller parts that it involves.

Facial expressions are constantly changing as we speak and as we listen during conversation. They help us to convey meaningful messages to our listeners and they help us show speakers what we are thinking, if we are confused, or if we agree etc. As well as this they are the biggest give away of our emotions. Look at any picture in a magazine and you will be able to get some idea of what the person is feeling; sadness, happiness, shamefulness, excitement, surprise or anger.

Gestures include what we do with our arms and hands; some gestures with meaning could be; waving, stop, come here, faster, slower, keep going, don't know, big, little. Aside from this we all flap our hands and arms about to convey the importance of our

Project Corner

"I've lost my voice!"

Project Elements

- Choose an activity to do with your child and play the game "I've lost my voice".
- Throughout the whole activity use only your non verbal communication to communicate with your child.
- Exaggerate your non verbal communication.
- Do not expect your child to use non verbal communication, just tell them that there's one rule to the game - no speaking.

Interaction Corner

Practice makes perfect

Parental role-play can be such a great way to get used to only using one non-verbal channel at any given time, some ideas to practice with:

Facial expression

- Look through a family photograph album.
- Flip through a catalogue

messages.

Physical positioning is another aspect of non verbal communication that we use subconsciously. We know just about what is the right distance to stand or sit to one another so as not to invade some ones personal space to make them feel uncomfortable. "It's not what you said, it's the way you said it!" Ever heard that before? **Prosody** and **intonation** is about the tone of your voice and how you use that to convey a message.

Posture also plays a big role in communication, it communicates how we are feeling; assertive, relaxed, tired, nervous.

The **timing** of our communication is vital in conveying what we want.

So you can see how communication is complex and there is much more than words to understand. And also how valuable non verbal communication is. Non verbal communication is an important ability that needs to be worked on. For children with autism this can be missed and needs to be amplified for them to notice it. The more that they are exposed to it the more they will have opportunities to learn to understand the meanings behind non verbal communication. In the RDI programme we begin by ensuring that parents are comfortable with using non verbal communication and then they use this with their children. As we work through the programme children make their own discoveries in non verbal communication, they are not forced to use non verbal communication instead they are given opportunities to communicate in a non verbal way where possible.

***Elisa Al Malah, BSc Psychology
RDI® Programme Certified Consultant***

More Than Words - Alysia's story / Our RDI Journey part 3

When we started RDI® with Alysia (Lissi), almost 5 years ago, along with an emphasis on using 'declarative statements' instead of 'imperative commands or questions' we were encouraged to communicate using non-verbal signals too i.e. facial expressions and gestures, but there was no

giving and seeking each other's emotional reactions to items within it.

- Food tasting - with a mixture of favourites all the way to 'yuck'.
- Scented items and comparing likes or dislikes.

Gesture

- Making something for your partner, but forgetting how well you already know their preference, so they have to indicate through gesture over what they would like next i.e. making a cup of tea / coffee.
- Trying to locate an item, with your partner knowing where it can be found but only using gesture to guide you to the location.

Prosody

- Use only sounds i.e. 'm', 'mmm' - adding emphasis to indicate 'yes please', 'no!', 'maybe', with any of the above.

People Watching

Observe how often non-verbal communication is used either on it's own or alongside words when watching;

- Team players playing sport i.e. football etc.
- TV i.e. soaps, films etc.
- Others shopping, in the park, on a bus

requirement for her to respond on a like for like basis. RDI® has evolved over the years to emphasise the need to incorporate all non-verbal communication under the 'broadband communication' umbrella, this includes body movement, facial expression, gesture, prosody (intonation and inflection of sounds), posture and timing as all playing a major part in everyday communication. Without the ability to understand another's use of, or with an inability to use 'broadband', you are unable to really communicate in an interactive animated manner.

Just after the RDI_LS (the RDI® system which houses the RDI® curriculum and acts as a community forum) was launched we visited our Consultant in Virginia for our six monthly RDA® (RDI® assessment) and the information that came back from that showed that Lissi did not use much 'broadband communication' to relay her own feelings or thoughts to us. In fact, I would say she appeared to be non animated in all her communication, with her face almost totally expressionless most of the time, apart from when she laughed. We had work to do which proved more difficult than we had initially thought....

Although when interacting with Lissi we were concentrating on trying to communicate with one modality i.e. our faces we were still automatically using other non-verbal communication instinctively as a whole communicative piece - which is very natural to do after using them integrally for so long.

Separating them in order to help Lissi to understand the information behind facial expression, or gesture, or prosody was crucial if we expected her to be able to become information rich when conveying her own message, or when emphasising her point. As we experimented it became clear that Lissi was strong with understanding that our facial expressions carried meaning, but not as good in using them to communicate; was weak with understanding any but real basic gesture and didn't use them at all herself; and with no surprise, as she has a speech and language disorder, didn't pick on our intonation / inflection and her own was all over the place.

Our first attempts at trying to use gesture were comical as our faces kept getting involved and it really did take some effort and many mistakes to totally

etc.

- Another person concentrating / thinking something through.

Raise RDI Awareness

If you would like some brochures, leaflets, or mini books of My Baby can Dance and The RDI Book for FREE to share with your friends, family or support groups, please send an email to elisa@thinkautism.co.uk stating how many you would like.

Have a clear out!

Have a clear out and with your unwanted items recycle them on the Autism Free Stuff UK yahoo group. The "Autism Free Stuff UK" group is open to families who have autistic children in the UK and are looking for related items or to get rid of items. This is a place to exchange and give away.

minimise all other signals. We tried role-play with each other and with our other children in order to get to a point where we felt we were in a good place to interact in this way with Lissi. Once she was also involved we hit another stumbling block as we didn't want to 'make her do' gestures and so we worked at involving her in building a gesture communication system i.e. 'I wonder how we can say "yes" and "a bit nearer"?' Or 'Maybe we could use this (thumbs up) for yes'. We learnt and grew from the process as a team.

Moving on to the present day Lissi is at a point where all of her 'broadband communication' is used in the same way as we all do, to emphasise our meaning and to engage the listener. She is able to pick-up on subtleties to decipher the meaning behind another's words i.e. 'Are you for real?' 'Are you kidding me?' 'Are you being mean?' and this is getting stronger every day. When, for instance, she is confused she will display this with her body movement, facial expression, intonation and gesture either with or without the spoken word. Her prosody still has a way to go, but that is understandable due to her co-occurring condition.

From my viewpoint these things are making her less vulnerable and more indistinguishable from her peers. But more than that she is using them naturally! It isn't hard work for her, it's automatic and integrated as part of everyday life. She truly understands and uses all means of communication and is not reliant on the spoken word alone. Breakthrough!

**Sharon Bradbrook-Armit - RDI® Parent
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Contact Details

If you would like to learn more about RDI® and how using it could help someone in your family, please contact either:

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