

Meaningful Connections

Understanding Communication Beyond Words

Connecting meaningfully with people who are nonverbal or have limited verbal abilities, particularly those with associated intellectual disabilities, is a topic close to my heart and deeply connected to my personal and professional life.

Some individuals, like my son, who has Level 3 autism, have had limited spoken communication since childhood. Others may lose their ability to communicate through speech following an accident or illness, while some experience a gradual decline in communication and cognitive abilities as they age.

Whatever the reason, the need for meaningful human connection remains.

We all seek connection, reassurance, and a sense of belonging. Yet so much of our everyday interaction relies on spoken language that we may unintentionally overlook those who communicate differently.

For someone who cannot easily express their needs, feelings, or preferences through words, unfamiliar people, changes in routine, or the absence of a trusted caregiver may be particularly distressing.

But communication does not begin or end with speech.

A glance, a movement, a familiar sound, or a subtle change in expression may tell us something important—if we learn how to notice.

Begin by Observing

One of the most valuable things we can do is spend quiet, unhurried time with the person we wish to connect with.

Even half an hour of attentive observation over several days can help us become more familiar with their individual ways of communicating.

Notice how they sit, move, look around, reach for objects, or respond when someone enters the room. Observe what changes when they are enjoying an activity, feeling uncomfortable, or encountering something unfamiliar.

The goal is not simply to identify behaviours. It is to understand what those behaviours might mean for this particular person.

Observation should also be respectful and unobtrusive. For some autistic individuals, being watched directly or expected to maintain eye contact can feel overwhelming. Sitting nearby,

sharing an activity, or observing through peripheral vision may create a more comfortable opportunity for connection.

Learn Their Body Language

Body language can provide valuable clues about a person's feelings, interests, and needs.

A smile, a frown, a tilt of the head, or a change in posture may indicate that something has caught their attention or that their experience has changed.

Small movements can be equally meaningful.

A person may reach towards you, offer a hand, move closer, or turn away when you enter the room. These actions may help you understand whether they welcome interaction, prefer more personal space, or need time before engaging.

Some individuals have familiar rhythmic movements, such as rocking, tapping, or moving their hands, that help them regulate themselves or express enjoyment. A change in these patterns may be worth noticing.

Similarly, a facial twitch, repeated gesture, or sudden withdrawal from an activity may be associated with discomfort, uncertainty, excitement, or something else entirely.

The important question is not simply, "What does this behaviour mean?" but "What might this behaviour mean for this person, in this moment?"

Look at what happened before the behaviour, what is happening around them, and how they respond to your actions.

Over time, these observations can help you recognize their individual communication patterns without making assumptions based on a single expression or movement.

Listen Beyond Words

Many people who do not use spoken language communicate through vocalizations such as humming, sighing, clicking, squealing, or other familiar sounds.

These sounds may express enjoyment, frustration, excitement, or a request for something.

Listen for changes in tone, pitch, rhythm, or frequency.

You may notice that someone makes a particular sound when anticipating a favourite activity or uses a different vocalization when something is bothering them.

Even the absence of a familiar sound can be worth noticing.

Rather than assigning a fixed meaning to every vocalization, consider the circumstances and observe what happens when you respond.

Sometimes, acknowledging a sound with a smile, a gentle response, or a familiar gesture can become the beginning of a meaningful exchange.

Discover Their Ways of Saying Yes and No

Being able to express a preference, accept an invitation, or refuse something is an important part of communication.

For someone who cannot say "yes" or "no," these responses may be expressed through facial expressions, body movements, gestures, vocalizations, or eye gaze.

A person may brighten, move closer, or reach towards something they want. They may turn away, push an object aside, or change their expression when they do not want to continue.

However, these responses are individual. A smile does not always mean yes, and looking away does not necessarily mean no.

Start with familiar situations in which you already have some understanding of the person's preferences.

Offer something they usually enjoy and observe their response. Then offer a genuine opportunity to decline or choose something different.

As you become more familiar with their signals, acknowledge them consistently.

When someone turns away from an offered activity, for example, you might say, "You don't want this right now," and pause or offer another choice.

This helps establish that their responses can influence what happens next.

Create Opportunities for Choice

Meaningful communication becomes especially valuable when it allows a person to participate in decisions about their own life.

Start with simple, familiar choices.

You might hold up two objects, show pictures of favourite activities, or place two items within view and allow the person time to indicate a preference.

Some individuals may point, reach, look towards an object, or use their eyes to shift attention between choices.

Others may need a different way of responding, such as touching a picture, making a sound, or using an established communication aid.

There is no single method that works for everyone.

What matters is finding an accessible way for the person to express a preference and ensuring that their choice is acknowledged.

Encourage Their Natural Ways of Expression

Once you begin to recognize someone's communication patterns, look for gentle ways to expand the interaction.

For example, if a person understands simple gestures, you might introduce a few consistent gestures or signs for familiar words such as "more," "drink," "go," "yes," and "no."

Use these naturally during everyday activities, pairing them with the spoken word, object, or action.

Allow time for the person to respond in their own way.

They may imitate the gesture, use a different movement, look towards the object, or simply show greater awareness of the interaction.

The purpose is not to insist that they communicate in a particular way. It is to offer additional possibilities while continuing to respect the ways they already express themselves.

Pictures, gestures, communication boards, and speech-generating devices may also provide valuable opportunities for expression, depending on the person's individual abilities and needs.

We are not trying to replace their natural communication. We are helping them discover more ways to be understood.

Connection Is a Two-Way Experience

Learning to recognize someone's communication is only one part of building a meaningful relationship.

The other part is how we respond.

When a person reaches towards us, do we acknowledge their invitation? When they turn away, do we respect their need for space? When they show interest in something, do we allow that interest to guide our interaction?

Our responses communicate something too.

They can convey that we are paying attention, that we respect the person's preferences, and that their attempts to communicate have meaning.

Connection does not always require an activity, a teaching objective, or an expectation that the person must respond.

Sometimes, sitting quietly together, sharing an enjoyable experience, or simply being present can be meaningful in itself.

Over time, these moments can build familiarity, trust, and a greater willingness to engage.

Final Thoughts

Our eyes and ears can only observe what our minds are prepared to notice.

When we become more attentive to the individual ways someone experiences and responds to the world, we begin to recognize possibilities for connection that we may previously have overlooked.

Meaningful communication is not measured by the number of words someone speaks. It is reflected in the opportunities they have to express themselves, influence their surroundings, and experience being understood.

Every person has their own way of connecting with the world.

Our responsibility is to remain curious, observant, and responsive enough to discover it.

Meaningful connection begins when we recognize that communication is already happening—and make the effort to understand it.