

Teaching Nonverbal Autistic Children to Talk

Adapted from Autism Speaks article by Geri Dawson and Lauren Elder

Research shows that even after age 4, many nonverbal autistic children can develop language. Below are seven effective, research-based strategies to support language development in nonverbal autistic children and adolescents:

1. Encourage Play and Social Interaction

- Language learning happens through play.
 - Try different games, songs, rhymes, and gentle roughhousing.
 - Position yourself at your child's eye level to improve interaction.
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2. Imitate Your Child

- Mimic your child's sounds and play behaviors.
 - This builds turn-taking and encourages vocalization.
 - Only imitate positive behaviors.
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3. Focus on Nonverbal Communication

- Use gestures and eye contact.
 - Model exaggerated gestures (e.g., pointing, nodding).
 - Respond to your child's gestures and give meaning to them.
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4. Leave "Space" for Your Child to Communicate

- Don't rush to speak for your child.
 - Pause after questions and wait expectantly.
 - Respond immediately to any sounds or movements.
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5. Simplify Your Language

- Use words or phrases slightly more complex than your child's current level.
 - For nonverbal children, use single words (e.g., "ball").
 - If they use single words, speak in short phrases (e.g., "roll ball").
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6. Follow Your Child's Interests

- Observe what your child is focused on and talk about it.
 - Narrate their actions using simple language.
 - Example: “shape,” “in,” or “dump shapes” during a shape sorter activity.
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7. Use Assistive Devices and Visual Supports

- Tools like picture-based devices or apps can encourage communication.
 - Picture boards or cards can help children express needs and thoughts.
 - These supports can complement and even stimulate speech development.
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Note: Your child’s therapist can help you select the best combination of these strategies. Keep them informed about what works and any challenges you face.