

Chapter 1 Family Handout

READING BODY LANGUAGE

The forms of nonverbal social communication include everything from facial expressions to posture and gestures, tone of voice, and how closely someone stands to another person.

Below are some examples of typical nonverbal communication behaviors that your child might display, along with some suggestions for how to address these issues:

- If your child addresses you in a voice tone that sounds disrespectful, then he might not understand that his tone is upsetting to you. Try to remain calm and repeat his words back to him to clarify the intended message, but without the added message that the tone of voice sends. Let your child know that you hear his words, but later tell him that his voice sounded too angry and that some people will find such a tone threatening. Let his teacher or therapist know that he has difficulty with tone of voice.
- Because eye contact is particularly difficult for children with autism spectrum disorders, allow your child to look away from your face when you are giving directions or when you are problem solving. Looking in your eyes might actually make it harder for your daughter to understand your words. You can check to make sure that she understands your words by asking her to repeat the directive.
- If your child tends to stand too close to other people when talking with them, tell him that you understand that he is unaware that he is standing too close.

Suggest to him that when he is standing too closely to someone, you will give him a prearranged sign to let him know that he's standing too close. Hopefully, this sign will help him realize he is too close and then he can take a step back. Let him practice with you even if his close proximity doesn't bother you. Nonverbal cues often feel less personal than constant verbal reminders and, therefore, they are easier to accept. Make sure you give him positive attention when he responds positively to your sign.

- If your child often asks you if you are angry or mad at her, remember that "reading" another person's face or body is also a social cognitive skill (this is called receptive nonverbal communication). Rather than reacting with frustration, explain that your face is just "resting" and that you didn't intend to look mad. If you actually are upset about something, let her know that she is correct in recognizing that your face is sending an angry message. If you are upset about something your child does, then let her know privately. Always avoid embarrassing your child in front of her peers.

A key point to remember is that nonverbal social missteps can cause you to unknowingly misinterpret your child's intentions. A good example is when you interpret a loud tone of voice as being rude. Recognition of your child's difficulty with nonverbal communication can go a long way in helping identify his social educational needs.