



I don't
understand you...
if only you
could talk...

I'm trying
Mommy...
please 'listen'...

It's All Gibberish to Me: Redefining “Non-verbal”

By Marge Blanc

The first interview about a child – it’s familiar to all of us in the autism community. It involves his history, his behaviors, his diet, and...his speech.

Q: “How does your child communicate?” parents are asked.

A: “He doesn’t really. He leads us around to what he wants, but he’s pretty much non-verbal.”

Q: “Does he use words?”

A: “Not really. He makes a few sounds, but he really doesn’t talk.”

Then the interview moves on from speech to sleep patterns, diet, etc. And then it ends.

But wait, we want to say. Is that all? Do you agree my child is non-verbal? Will he ever talk? How do I know if he understands me? What do I do?

Even though you’ll likely have a more extended conversation about communication later, it’s hard to wait when your presumption has already gone unchallenged. Your child seems “pretty much non-verbal” to you, and no one has tried to talk you out of it, at least so far.

Now what? You may have read that a large percentage of kids on the spectrum remain non-verbal. Is your child going to be one of them? You may have heard

that having echolalia is a good prognostic indicator for developing speech. But that doesn’t seem to be your child.

What do We Mean by “Non-Verbal”?

In this article, we want to consider several important questions: what do people in the autism community mean by the term “non-verbal”? When you say it, what do you mean? If your child is non-verbal, what does that imply for his future? And, more immediately, what should you do next?

First of all, know that there’s no general agreement about what the term “non-verbal” means. When you said you thought your child was “pretty much non-verbal,” that didn’t necessarily translate into

something specific to your interviewer. The term is used so commonly that we erroneously think we are describing something everyone understands. This is not true. Technically, the term means “without language,” because the dictionary definition of “verbal” is “words,” and words make up our language. Technically, again, non-verbal would mean “without any expressive language: signed, written, typed, or spoken” and, technically, without the understanding of language either. We doubt you meant the latter. How would you know?

In real life, in the autism community, we call our kids non-verbal far too frequently, without considering what we mean, or don’t mean, by the term. We each read our own interpretation into the term, with the fuzziness of the label conjuring up a myriad of images, perhaps none of them true about a particular child. Think about it: we’re not talking about a flower, or a root crop, which might actually be non-verbal. And we’re not even talking about dogs and horses, many of whom understand words in their own context. Don’t our kids deserve much more consideration before we give them such a label?

But wait, you might say: we don’t mean that non-verbal kids don’t understand

Our child's verbal status depends

anything. True, we don't mean this explicitly, but in too many of our programs, kids labeled non-verbal are treated as cognitively or linguistically unable to talk. Language is deemed too sophisticated for many of our supposedly non-talking kids, and we tend to treat them as language-challenged. This misunderstanding can be demeaning to a child, and the supposition about his lack of language, receptive and expressive, fails to support him in the ways he actually needs.

When We Don't Understand

To help us rethink our assumptions, we need to start with a more honest discussion of what we mean when we say "non-verbal." What really happens is we label kids as non-verbal when they don't say words we understand. This becomes our unstated "definition." A child might sound like he's just screaming, or we might describe his sound-making as guttural. If it's more fluid, we might call it gibberish, implying it's nonsensical. And we use the same term to describe all of the above: non-verbal. But our definition is never stated, and for that reason, unexamined. Until now!

Here's the key: understandable words. The only way we know how to judge whether or not a young child uses words is if we understand them. And, for the most part, to be understood, a child has to say words we know, and in a way we recognize. That's why, when a young child is taught to say, "ball," "cup," and "baby," we understand her. But, if a child picks up language from elsewhere, like Swedish or

Hungarian, it might be lost on most of us, and we would be wrong to judge such a toddler as non-verbal.

This is the case with our kids, too.

What...you might be protesting? You haven't heard my child; he doesn't talk at all! But, is that really true? To talk means to articulate sounds, so we need to look at the difference between not uttering sound at all, and the development of articulation skills. Granted, a very small percentage of kids cannot utter sound, the issue being at the level of the vocal cords. And our most dyspraxic little ones have a hard time coordinating their voices with the rest of their bodies; they are the quiet "good babies" who rarely cry as infants. But as time goes on, even these children are no longer silent.

If your own child isn't completely silent, but you still think he's not talking "at all," we have some redefining to do! Your child is vocal, which simply means he is using his vocal cords to make sound. With that understanding, we can now go a step further, and examine the sound your child produces with his voice, and how he modifies that sound to express himself!

Hidden Messages

A series of questions follows that will help you listen more closely to your vocal child, and hear the feelings, thoughts, and subtle messages that power his voice.

1. First, what does your child sound like at a purely reflexive level? Does she have different ways of crying? When does she use a whimper versus

a full-out bellowing cry? Does your child have different ways of protesting? Does your child laugh in different ways depending on the trigger? Even at this reflexive level, what are the hidden messages?

2. If your child makes more subtle vocal sounds, what are they like? What are his happy sounds like? Repeat your child's vocalizations to yourself until they take on meaning. Feel the feelings of your child.
3. Do you hear variety in your child's sound-making? When they're not just the "Waa!" of crying, do you hear some vowel variation? Vowels are the acoustic by-product of the shape of the mouth, so they change when a child screams, cries, laughs, whimpers, etc. These variations are his way of communicating different feelings.
4. Now notice if you hear sustained sound, like when your child is swinging, or sliding, or being twirled around. Even one second of sustained sound is long enough to support tone change, and that can support meaning. When do you hear your child's voice go up or down? What does it make you think of? Does it remind you of yourself talking "baby talk"? Try it out; think of the feelings and meaning behind your own uses of intonation.

partly on us, the listeners.

When Do We Become Verbal?

Ironic though it might seem, our child's verbal status depends partly on us, the listeners. Communication takes two people, and without an attentive listener, we are dealing with a tree-in-the-forest situation where no one is there to hear it fall. We are a big part of the equation, and really listening to our kids is at least half of what makes them understandable.

Now that you've immersed yourself in listening to your child, you are ready to rethink our presumptions, and realize how misunderstood kids can be if we don't hear them say any words we understand. We don't like to think of ourselves this way, but most of us need evidence that our children are talking. And when we hear them say something we've taught them, our listening job is so much easier. Then we really know they are talking!

But there are two big problems with trying to apply these standards to our kids:

First, most of our kids are motor-impaired, so we really can't set the same standards for motor speech that we do with typically-developing kids. We'd never consider holding kids with Down Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy to those strict standards. "No, she doesn't have language because I can't understand her." It's hard to imagine why we apply such high standards of intelligibility to our ASD kids' speech.

Second, most of our kids are gestalt language processors, meaning they begin developing language by processing long streams of language and once they are physically capable, attempt to produce these language chunks. Many a savvy parent has realized months or years later that the unintelligible sound-making their child once used was actually language. It was not until their child's speech was clearer that they realized their child was verbal all along. Just think for a moment



how hard it is to demonstrate echolalia when you're a little kid, especially a little kid who hasn't had much experience with vocalizing at all. If you are interested in reading more about this style of language development, please look for, "Finding the Words...to Tell the Whole Story" on the author's website, noted at the end of this article.

Now, let's take a breather for a moment, and spend some fun time tuning your ears, by listening to someone else's children. Some months ago, a two-minute YouTube movie of a pair of twin boys created an Internet sensation, as we were privileged to watch two little toddlers engaged in lengthy dialogue. (http://youtube/_JmA2CIUvUY) More than 23 million viewers have chuckled at the conversational acumen of these boys, not concerning themselves with what they were communicating. With our own child, we're desperately looking for answers: What does she want? What do I do? But with other people's kids, the onus is on their parents, and we can just enjoy the fun of the banter.

As you watch, you will hear these little conversationalists, undoubtedly gestalt processors as are most little boys, producing long strings of "dah dah dah," with a variety of intonation and punctuated by occasional syllable variations. How many words did you hear these kids say? I honestly caught two or three: "Mama" and "OK," and probably "Up." Out of the hundreds of multi-syllabic sound-configurations, the boys spoke

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Some things we enjoy doing; others not so much so. Our students need to learn, before they leave the nest, that we all have to do things we don't enjoy doing, and that grit and tenacity will bring more success to their lives than will doing things just because they make us feel good. We all have days we don't feel like going to class or to work. We set up our daily schedules and sometimes we don't feel like following them. Yet we buckle down and do these things because they contribute to the overall flow of our lives, keep us organized and on track.

6. Ongoing Academic/Vocational Learning

The ultimate goal in adult life is independence, whether in college or in the employment sector. Success in life requires that we keep learning, synthesizing new information, and incorporating it into our daily functioning. We've found that young adults who are not able to achieve success with the first five steps above are likely unable to achieve this ultimate last step!

Research studies indicate that many of our students have serious challenges with adaptive functioning skills, despite them having

some of the brightest minds academically. Our motivation in sharing this information is to help parents, educators, counselors, and others recognize the critical need for active teaching of independent living skills, well before the mandated transition plan that starts at age 16. The shift from childhood into adulthood is a shift from class work to life's work. Teaching and supporting the skills needed to manage intellectual, social, and physical tasks simultaneously is the foundation for independent functioning in the adult years. While our students are not expected to be completely independent by the time they exit high school, the tools to learn independent living should be emerging. It's never too soon to start! 📖

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maybe two or three understandable words. But, is that how we judged whether or not they were talking? No. It was the richness of the entire conversation: the reciprocity, the sentence intonation, the synchrony of gestures that told us Sam and Ren were talking.

To be fair, we don't presume that each of these toddlers' "dah dah dah" represented language. Some of those strings of sound undoubtedly served to just keep the conversation going. We know that little boys' talking is fuzzy anyway - twin or no twin. Even so, Sam and Ren had their conversational skills down pat: people can see in their eyes, their postures, and their gestures that they are talking.

But our ASD kids often don't look like they're talking, or

even trying to talk. Consider the little boy portrayed in the drawing on page 25. He is just one little boy, but he represents an experience many parents report. At the time of that first interview, he always seemed to be shrieking in distress, lacking the motor control to vocalize in a more refined way. Who would have dreamed he had thoughts in his head, and was echoing Barney the best he knew how. Over time, however, his vocal control and his speech improved, and he was able to produce a more graded sound. Then came two notes of a familiar tune. From that, "I love you" emerged from the sound stream everyone thought was gibberish. A verbal child all along, but not understood. Unintelligible

like Sam and Ren, but trying oh-so-hard to communicate!

Our Kids are Verbally-Delayed

If you are ready to give up the misused term, "non-verbal," then what shall we call our valiant kids who are trying so hard to communicate? The term "speech delayed" refers to motor execution; "language delayed" refers to linguistic competence. We propose using this term: "verbally delayed." It is accurate, respectful, and full of the presumption and hope our kids deserve!

Please think about it. Our attitude toward our kids' vocalization matters, and it takes two to communicate! Once we dare to interpret our children's rough vocalizations, and share the feelings, the

thoughts – and the language – behind them, we respond to them as communicators. We acknowledge our kids as conversational partners, and in the process, provide easier-to-use language models. In this way, our motor-challenged kids learn there is someone who is listening...and hearing them! In this way, many a "verbally delayed" child is finally understood as verbal! 📖

Marge Blanc directs a speech and language clinic in Madison, WI. Her articles are available on the clinic's website, www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com, and include a series on motor speech development, and one tracing language development from echolalia to self-generated language.