

When our kids experience “wordlessness”

(Part 1)

Hello, dear reader! And welcome back from the “never never land” that was summer. If it feels like reality is starting to creep back into your family’s consciousness, you are definitely not alone. It is natural to yearn for even that single “day at the beach,” the one that offered moments of peace for you and your family, when regulation issues disappeared with the tide and there were moments when no one needed any words at all. Life seemed like it was meant to be experienced on its own terms. There really are no words for “bliss” - not really...

Our new topic is *wordlessness*, a departure from our other topics to date: language development, speech access, language retrieval, but just as vital to the fabric of the communication we share with our children.

Some of life’s experiences just don’t come with words...or very many of them. If we’ve learned anything from Temple Grandin, it is that perceptions come in many forms - elaborate visualizations, olfactory cornucopia, feelings of fight and flight and everything in between - and that words can change, mask, diminish, and even inhibit many of them. Think about some of our most profound feelings, the ones we call love, peace, or hope, for example, and how we struggle to explain their essences in prose and poetry. We try with wedding vows, greeting cards, and graduation addresses, but our deepest feelings often find their truest expression in a kiss, a sigh, a smile.

Now consider our children’s emotions, and how even sophisticated adult language fails to capture the heart of being “lost,” the state our kids so often live in. I’ve pondered to myself, “...then what would ‘found’ feel like?” Are there words to express our kids’ feelings at the height of optimal

regulation, or in the depths of a meltdown?

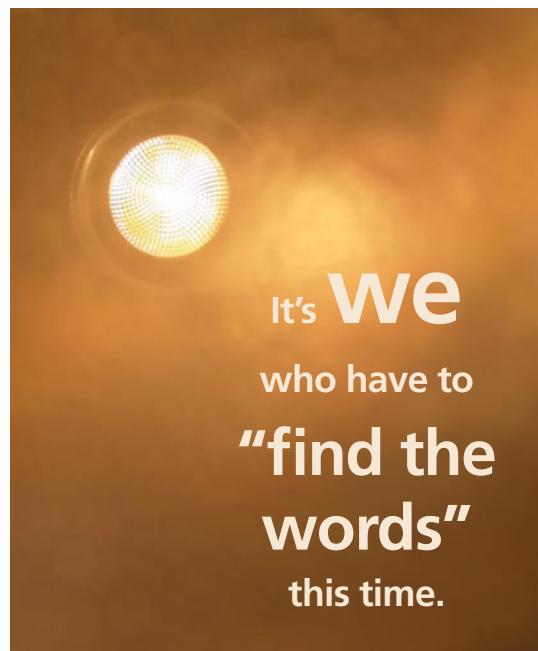
Even when there are words, they don’t necessarily explain anything. In fact, they may not even tell a story, or offer an opinion. Rather, like dance, or nature, or art, or laughter, they work their magic by evoking a similar feeling in the listener.

Amy Tan, celebrated author of *The Joy Luck Club*, describes in one of her more well-known essays, “Mother Tongue”

how she grew up as a Chinese-American with many forms of English around her. She says that as she tried to write about her mother, she used “all the Englishes I grew up with,” the “simple” English she spoke to her mother, the “broken” English her mother spoke, the “watered-down” Chinese she understood, and the “internal language” she imagined her mother to have. Ms. Tan notes, “I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.”

Another novelist, and mother of a boy on the spectrum, Cammie McGovern, offers another example in one of her popular articles, “The Silent Language of Love: Life

With Autism.” Reflecting on a moment of unspoken connection between her 10-year-old son and a girl in his class, Ms. McGovern writes, “We have learned that silence is a cloud with its own silver lining. What Ethan manages to communicate in his odd ways, in his gestures, in holding hands with that girl, in his morning hugs can seem at times truer than a half-hour of his brother’s nightly laments about playground popularity... Sometimes I think that in the absence of easy access to words, there’s a way he says the real things better than the rest of us.”





So, back to the world of words, Marge! You're an SLP, writing a column about "finding words," about the pragmatics of developing language, and accessing speech. Get real!

I am. Believe me. The realm between words and wordlessness is a part of my everyday life, as I'm sure it is yours. It's just that I may have a wider breadth of experience that may help.

Take last spring for example. My young friend, Russel, whom you may remember from a previous Digest column* used an uncharacteristically-simple phrase when he said to me, "Bye bye, Door County." For those of you who are not from the Midwest: Door County is a real place, the "thumb" of Wisconsin that juts out into Lake Michigan, and a lovely vacation spot. Russel and his family, along with one of my fellow SLPs and I, spent three wonderful days there two summers ago. That Russel was bidding "bye bye" when we were planning a rendezvous in a few months seemed strange. So, I queried, "Bye bye, Door County?" and in the silence that followed, continued with the train of thought this triggered in me.

I pondered what Russel might have meant by this, and ventured a guess, "Don't worry, buddy. I'm sure we'll find a date that works for everybody." Adequately prompted by their boy, I called Russel's parents later that day to find out if they'd expressed some discouragement about finding a date, especially within earshot of Russel. To my surprise, they said, "Oh, I thought we'd agreed on June 23." I said, "No, I thought you knew June wouldn't work for me, and that you were working on another date." They said, "No, we've been getting everything set for the weekend of June 23." Whew! That communication ever works at all is a miracle!

And, for kids, it's even more miraculous! For Russel to explain that he was worried about confusion in the ranks would have required more language skills than he currently has. His language development is coming along nicely, and when he has some visuals to reference, it can be flawless. But in the realm of the invisible (like miscommunication among the adults around him, and the resulting kaffuffle), his language doesn't have a prayer.

It was at this point in my own thinking, though, that I could see what Russel's comment was meant to do...*what he*

meant for me to do! It was not the literal meaning itself that was so important to Russel. It was what Russel could evoke in me that made the communication work.

Russel clearly knew me well! With a modicum of words, he could trigger a reaction in me, one that would get me thinking, *thinking about what he wanted me to think!* It was for the *effect* that Russel used the phrase, "Bye bye, Door County!" He used a combination of "Englishes" to trigger my next move. His simple phrase spoke volumes, or at least got me to speak volumes. The incongruous mental picture I had of Russel waving bye bye to his favorite place on the planet was "worth a thousand words," which is about what it took me to tell you this story!

Russel has worked this kind of magic several times since, as have some other gifted thinkers I know. So, in the columns to come, let's do this again. Let's examine some other places of wordlessness, or near-wordlessness, other junctures of self that coalesce at moments of brilliant self-expression. Sometimes they work, sometimes not. But, here's the point: It's we who make them work...and it's we who have to "find the words" this time. Communication depends on two people. This is the part we play when we meet the "silent cloud" of wordlessness. ■

* Refer to the September-October 2006 issue

References

- McGovern, Cammie. 2006. "The Silent Language of Love: Life With Autism." www.cammiemcgovern.com.
- Tan, Amy. 1990. "Mother Tongue". The Threepenny Review.

Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP founded the Communication Development Center, in Madison, Wisconsin 10 years ago. Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses, the Center has successfully helped scores of children as they moved through the stages of language acquisition. Contact Marge and her associates: Communication Development Center, 700 Rayovac Drive, Suite 200, Madison, WI 53711, lyonblanc@aol.com, (608) 278-9161.

When our kids experience “wordlessness”

(Part 2)

Hello everyone, and welcome back to our continuing topic of “wordlessness”! Yes, in spite of all our good efforts, our kids find themselves without words under all types of conditions. And, yes, we routinely help our kids by supporting them in alertness, vocal access, using new language, and finding old language. But, sometimes, none of these strategies seem particularly helpful, and we really don’t know what to do. So, we mull things over and bumble along. We all know the feeling: What was that all about? What is she saying? What does he want? Why is she saying that? What should I do next?

As our fall season enters the home stretch, and Thanksgiving is getting closer, I’d like to tell you a story of wordlessness...and thanksgiving. It happened to me, and it involves one of my best friends, Will, who happens to have an ASD label. One day, after I bumbled along for awhile, mulling over Will’s modicum of words, I finally realized that he had demonstrated for the umpteenth time how connected we all are, and often, wordlessly, or almost so.

As adults, we are often in the position of having to react to our children’s wordlessness with words. It’s often up to us to “find the words” to complete the circle of communication, and to spin a child’s meaning into words our kids can hear, so they can use them the next time.

We’re quite used to many kinds of wordless communication: facial expression, gestures, and timing, for instance. But less-conventional attempts at communication – the kind we often experience with our spectrum kids – aren’t always so easy to decipher. You might recall this author going through

a lengthy stream of consciousness exercise to get the point of Russel’s pithy four-word sentence in Part 1 of this series.

Our story this time illustrates some general principles to help us find the words our children don’t have. Will, the subject of the story, is a perceptually-gifted 17-year-old, whom you might remember from previous columns*. That he can hear a whispered conversation in the next room while listening to his favorite music playing right next to him is a clue to understanding this story.



Will **does** communicate with words, but they are still a preciousy-limited commodity. As he continues to develop conventional language forms to replace his old echolalia, Will often supplements his truncated sentences with other modalities, like playing just-the-right song or just-the-right lines on a VHS or DVD player.

Will set up the conversation we’re discussing by playing a favorite scene from the Mary Poppins movie, the segment where Uncle Albert and Bert share a joke about the double meaning of “down in the mouth.” The expression refers to the down-turned edges of a sad mouth, of course, but Uncle Albert

says his grandfather woke up feeling “down in the mouth” after he’d “chewed his pillow to bits.” Bert, Uncle Albert...and Will...laugh every time they hear this!

Then Will said, “Cause you’re...,” selecting a partial phrase that referred to ‘you, Marge Blanc,’ a referent that was, at first, lost on me. As part of our language-development program, we share combinations of media regularly, and Will often juxtaposes multiple clues to explain a question or comment



he has. We are used to holding Will's verbalization in mental suspension, until it's meaning becomes more clear.

Next, Will began commenting on anger, saying with a deep and growly voice, "Gina angry," "AJ angry," "Meera angry," etc., providing a dramatically-exaggerated "down in the mouth" facial expression to go with the words. Will then said, "Cause you...," and again, the point was lost on me. In some kind of adult oblivion, I started to talk about anger, which I thought Will was exploring in those people around him. That Will is the most emotionally-balanced human being I have ever met didn't click with me as I launched into what I thought was a "teachable moment."

I explained how the vocal tone and facial expression Will was portraying might really be more about adult frustration and sense of responsibility than true anger. Finally, a light bulb clicked on in my head, and I played back an unpleasant conversation with our building manager earlier in the day. Yes, I thought she seemed angry at the time, but maybe she wasn't! I stopped my lecture and said, "Oh, Will, you're getting me to say all this, so I can learn from my own words!" I continued, "Our building manager may not have been so much angry as frustrated! I get it. Thank you, Will!!" With that, Will rewound to the funny scene, and we all really laughed this time!

Interestingly, we had never told Will about the incident with the building manager, and it never dawned on me that he might have sensed it, or wanted to talk about my reaction to it...until I "found the words" to talk about it with him!

Certainly your child doesn't have to be as perceptually-gifted as Will for this story to have relevance to you. The more common occurrences of our shared lives with our children include countless incidents of non-verbal happenings that kids catch on to. After all, they can see our facial expressions when we have no idea we're even using them! What might our kids want to share with us, sometimes **about** us, that they don't yet have the words to express?

We all know we have to play detective with our children. And, sometimes we have to play detective with ourselves too...so that when our kids get us talking, we can pay attention to what we actually say, and, maybe, just maybe, hear our kids' thoughts expressed in the words we say!

Even when our children have just a modicum of words, and even when **we** are the ones "finding the words" to finish their sentences, our kids really do say "the darndest things!"

Now, let's examine the commonalities in Russel and Will's stories, and pull out the principles involved in "finding the words" our kids don't yet have.

Principle #1 is to stay in the conversation. You are building shared meaning with your child, so make your part add to the whole, rather than simply turning it back to your child with a question. Questions serve a useful purpose, of course, but use them judiciously. Instead, engage in "self-talk" and tell your child what you're thinking. Be yourself, and talk from the heart. Realize that you are modeling language at the same time, so pick language your child can use later.

Principle #2 is to keep thinking. This joint conversation is more about meaning than about the words themselves. What are you feeling? Stay honest, and find words that express that honesty. Our kids are more sophisticated at reading us than we sometimes realize, and they know if we're being real with them.

So, to reiterate the point we made at the end of our last column, sometimes our kids' limited-word communiqués work, sometimes not. **It's up to us to "find the words" that make them work!** Communication takes two people, and we will be good communication partners when we meet limited language, and even wordlessness, by finding the right words! ■

* Please see the May - June and November - December 2005 issues

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When our kids experience “wordlessness”

(Part 3)

Once heard a film-maker explain it this way, “Artists have a responsibility to make people feel that best part of themselves.” Through art, we are inspired to feel, and to be, our best selves...at least for a moment! Our emotions, even our wisdom, are kindled, and rekindled, through the gentle craftings of art. These special feelings can happen when we hear “our song” on the radio, catch the final strains of our alma mater, or glimpse an old, favorite movie scene. Some of this media magic is very personal, of course, and some is shared. For instance, think of the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, or Annie singing “Tomorrow,” or Bogey and Bacall in *Casablanca*. In the space of a few moments, and with the right artistic rendering, we can revisit the lullaby of our youth, a Rocky Balboa-style victory, or our own tumble down a rabbit hole.

I treasure all the experiences that art has brought me, and, interestingly, because of them, have come to appreciate a special brand of “wordless” artistry many of our ASD kids create. Children regularly tap what’s best in me, I’ve discovered, and when our amazing kids do this wordlessly, their creations have brought me innumerable blessings.

Our story this time is about a young friend of mine, who is gifted with this special artistry. Jim, as I will call him, is becoming a proficient communicator in traditional ways: he is increasing both his typing skill and his speech fluency, and is known for his well-chosen words. Through

his voice-output augmentative communication device, he has become a local spokesperson for what he so aptly calls, “autistic wisdom.” Jim is talented with other kinds of media, too, and is often the DJ at parties, able to create an ever-changing mood for his guests. He’ll select a deeply-moving song, and then before his friends become lost in contemplation, lift the mood with a light, jazzy number. The house is rocking, and the deep thoughts of minutes ago morph into playful laughter. Like Will, who was featured in Part 2 of this series, Jim regularly sprinkles brilliant artistry onto his speech and language sessions. The problem is, we adults often miss it!

We used to think Jim’s movie selections were just ones he wanted to watch because he liked them best. But, as we started to pay closer attention to the content, the mood, and the context of Jim’s media “message”, we all found

our emotions tapped in ways we were unaccustomed to. We really listened to Kermit the Frog wax eloquent about how “everyone matters.” We paid special attention to Kermit and Miss Piggy’s wedding, and thought about the words as John Denver and the Muppets sang, “It’s in every one of us to be wise. Find your heart. Open up both your eyes...” When we truly listened, we found ourselves feeling “that best part” of ourselves in the process!





How does Jim do it? Well, he has an extensive collection of videos, DVDs, and CDs, and his encyclopedic brain knows each one essentially by heart. Jim often cues them up very specifically, accessing special parts quickly. I'll never forget one day when I was running around frenetically, caught in the web of being a responsible adult. Before I knew it, Big Bird was addressing me from his nest, asking me what I like to do during "quiet time." I laugh even now, just thinking about how surprised I was. And, you guessed it: I sat down where I was, breathed deeply, and smiled broadly – with great thanksgiving!

Jim's talent with the rewind button developed into an art form over the years, and we have been regularly treated to "performances" comprised of several clips served up on a special order. Jim would just pop in several cued-up videos in succession, and we would sit back and be entertained. What I often reflected on as I relaxed and paid attention to his artistry was that playful part of myself that Jim was able to tap. I think our playfulness is the best part of adults who work and play with children! But, how is it that we so often let our playful nature become overshadowed by the "responsible" part, the "accountable" part, the part that has the "lesson plan" or the agenda?

Many others of Jim's friends have delighted in his media events as well. Last fall, for example, Jim treated me, and our SLP assistant, Jessi, to a short, well-orchestrated show using You Tube clips. Jessi and Jim have been friends for years, and ride horses together each week. But, starting last fall, Jessi had another role to play with Jim. In her position as SLPA, Jessi was now charged with monitoring some of Jim's speech practice in the community (read: carrying a clipboard on horse-back!). Yes, the lines between friendship and accountability had become blurry, and the first person to notice it was, of course, Jim. So, within the space of five minutes one day, Jim accessed a string of Muppet clips that quickly reminded me of my potential for playfulness, even as a clinic supervisor! You can bet I took that message to heart!

This is how Jim spun his message: First, there was a Disney clip that promised to help us "discover our roots," followed by a quick "I'm sorry," from another clip. Then I heard the strains of the Beatle's song, "Octopus's Garden": "We would be so happy you and me, no one there to tell us what to do." Hmm, I was thinking... Then there were the elves from Muppet Classic Theater delivering their "wish for a miracle." Jim concluded his presentation with two partial sentences. The first was, "I took the liberty of..." The second gave credit where credit was due, announcing that the message had come from "our executive producer." This is what we used to call Jim, and he'd always lived up to the moniker.

Once again, I'd been reminded about the value of play, and that best part of me, my "inner child," that also supports others to play! In reflection, I'm also reminded how much our hearts respond to beauty, poetry, art, song, and drama. And I hope I will always try to remember to "find the words" in myself that acknowledge our kids' intentions, ideas, feelings...and the brilliance that makes their communiqués shine like beacons to the rest of us!

The points from our last two columns deserve repeating here: Sometimes our kids' wordless communiqués work, sometimes not. It's often up to us to *make* them work! So, when our children's communication-through-art is wordlessly presented to us, we are the audience who can hear the message and "find the words" to give it voice! When we do, we'll discover the best in both our children and ourselves! 🍀

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