

BCBA GUIDE: Supporting Nonverbal Clients

I recently welcomed a new client who faces challenges in language and communication skills, primarily being nonverbal and having limited speech. This situation is quite different from working with a high-functioning, verbally responsive client, and it requires a different approach. The question now is: where do I begin, and is there a structured hierarchy or curriculum that should be followed?

Understanding the Approach

Working with nonverbal children requires a structured yet flexible approach tailored to their unique communication needs. The goal is to build functional communication, increase engagement, and promote social interactions using evidence-based ABA strategies.

Core Strategies for Nonverbal Clients

1. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Systems

- PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) – Teach children to exchange pictures for desired items/needs.
- Communication Devices/Apps – Proloquo2Go, LAMP Words for Life, or other AAC tools can help provide a “voice” for nonverbal clients.

2. Functional Communication Training (FCT)

- Teach requesting (“I want,” “help”), using gestures, picture cards, or AAC.
- Reinforce functional communication over problem behaviors (e.g., teach a replacement for tantrums when requesting).

3. Creating a Structured & Predictable Environment

- Routine & Consistency – Predictable sessions reduce anxiety and encourage participation.

Choice-Making – Let the child pick between two options (e.g., “ball or car?”) to encourage communication.

4. Reinforcement Strategies

- Immediate Reinforcement – Reward any attempts at communication with preferred items, praise, or access to desired activities.
- Variable Reinforcement – Once a skill is learned, reinforce intermittently to strengthen long-term use.

5. Building Social Engagement & Play

- Parallel Play – Play alongside the child without demands to foster natural interactions.
- Modeling Social Skills – Encourage turn-taking, eye contact, and imitation in play activities.
- Use Sensory Play – Engaging in sensory-based activities (playdough, bubbles, music) encourages communication.
- Always begin with objects instead of pictures since the client can see, touch and experience better with objects.
- Targets like matching objects, sorting objects, tacting-pointing/touch to objects is a pre-requisite to using pictures.

6. Incorporating Movement & Sensory Breaks

- Some nonverbal children need movement breaks or sensory input to stay engaged. Use gross motor activities like jumping or crawling to support self-regulation.

Key Goals for Sessions

- ☑ Pairing & Rapport-Building – Build trust first before introducing structured learning. Use preferred activities, sensory play, and no immediate demands.

- ☑ Teaching Pointing & Gestures – Model pointing to request items and reinforce attempts.
- ☑ Encouraging Imitation – Many children learn by copying! Use hand-over-hand prompting and reinforce small attempts at imitating actions.
- ☑ Generalization of Skills – Use naturalistic teaching strategies (e.g., prompting a child to request a snack during snack time, rather than a controlled therapy setting).

Recommended Resources

- A Work in Progress – Ron Leaf & John McEachin
- Early Intervention for Children with ASD – S.K. Lund & Alan Schnee

By implementing these structured yet flexible strategies, you can create an environment where nonverbal clients feel empowered to communicate in their own way—whether through gestures, AAC, or other means.

Have a question?

Need aba clarification on something? Fill out the anonymous survey in the body of this email.

For more resources, check our BCBA library or reach out for support.