

Understanding Non-Verbal Cues and Early Sounds

By: Annie Rosenberg
KUMC OTD Student 2025
Emmanuel Family and Child
Development Center

Look For:

Non-Verbal Cues

- May mean something they want or are all done with (could be pointing, gestures, facial expressions)
- **Gestures:** reaching, waving, guiding/taking your hand
- **Facial expressions:** smile, frown, eyebrows raising
- **Eye contact:** attention or request for help

Vocalizations/Sounds

- Cooing/humming/grunting
- Repetitive sounds
- High pitched noises or soft babbling

These could all be ways of trying to express needs, desires, or struggles

How to Respond:

Offer Choices and Wait

- Offer 2 choices & wait for a response - try counting to 20 before repeating
- Look for non-verbal cues and/or sounds
- Praise child for making a choice

Simple and Clear Language

- Short, clear statements versus questions (“Let’s eat” versus “Do you want to eat lunch”)
- Pair words with actions (point to outside if you say “let’s go outside”)

Encourage Interaction through Play

- Model turn taking and sharing during play

Maintain communication

- Acknowledge/Respond/imitate sounds **even if you do not understand**
- Reinforces communication attempts & encourages imitation

Use Visual Supports

- Use pictures or visual schedules to show activities
- Helps communicate child's wants/needs
- Prepares child for what’s next

Offer Sensory Tools

- Allow child to explore sensory toys and a quiet space to help with self-regulation and stimulate communication

Encouraging Communication

- Thumbs up or smile
- Praise efforts with specifics (“Good job pointing!” or “I see you want the ball!”)

How this relates to social emotional learning

- Empathize with students’ feelings
- Strengthens student-teacher relationships
- Helps students feel understood
- Creates a nurturing and inclusive environment

References

Goldin-Meadow S. (2009). How gesture promotes learning throughout childhood. *Child development perspectives*, 3(2), 106–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2009.00088.x>

<https://www.helpguide.org/relationships/communication/nonverbal-communication>