



# Complex Child E-Magazine

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## If Only He Could Talk! Communication Strategies for Children with Visual Impairments

by Amber Bobnar

"If only he could talk!"

I find myself thinking this all too often. My son, Ivan, is both totally blind and also cognitively impaired. He is the light of my life and a handful at the same time. I'm sure you can relate!

Ivan can't talk, and of course this is a huge barrier for him. If he's crying or upset, he can't tell me why. If he needs something, he can't tell me what it is. Even when he suddenly lights up and laughs, he can't tell me what's so funny.



This leaves me wishing that Ivan could speak; wishing that Ivan had *language*.

But I also recognize that "language" is an awfully amorphous goal. What is language exactly? Is it the ability to use words or the ability to understand and communicate? What are the important aspects of communication and are there other ways to obtain them besides actually speaking words?

### What is Communication?

If you think about it, communication isn't really about language or about words. It's about getting a message out to others and understanding their messages in return. It's a give-and-take, a back-and-forth of *meaning*.

There are two types of communication: **expressive** and **receptive**. I'm sure you've heard both of these terms before and their meaning is pretty clear: Expressive communication is the ability to express a thought to someone else; receptive communication is the ability to understand what others are saying. True communication requires both.

And, really, we do this all the time without using language. Here's a scene between my son and me at the dinner table:

Me: Ivan, would you like more rice? [I place the fork in his hand so he can feel it]

Ivan: [turns his head away and fusses]

Me: No? Ivan is all done with his rice. Would you like a drink of water? [I place the cup in his hand]

Ivan: [turns toward me and opens mouth]

Me: Yes. Yes, Ivan wants water.

I'm filling in the language gaps for both of us, speaking the words that Ivan is missing, but as you can see, even without uttering a sound, Ivan is communicating quite clearly. And I am reinforcing my words with touch, so that he can see that there is meaning behind my sounds.

By providing the actual words for him (rice, no, water, yes), I'm hoping that he will see that what he is understanding and expressing can also be represented through words. But, even without that final step toward speech, Ivan and I are still *conversing*.

There are many children like Ivan who are nonverbal and working on this skill. Below are some ways you can help your child communicate even if he can't speak and can't see.

## **Encouraging Receptive Communication**

The first step to communication is to understand what others are trying to say to you. Here are some simple ways to help your child understand you.

### **Create hello and name signs**

Hello and name signs are simple touches, sounds or even objects that tell your child, "Hi! It's mommy!" A nice hello sign may be to pat your child on his shoulder or rub his tummy--something simple that you can do every time you greet him, so that he can get ready to listen and communicate with you. Name signs are usually something related to you specifically. For example, if you always wear the same bracelet, you could have your child touch your bracelet to help him recognize you. Many kids can recognize their parents by voice, but the addition of the name sign just solidifies the message and gets them used to thinking in terms of symbols, a perfect pre-literacy skill. So when picking your child up from school you may walk up to him, pat his shoulder and say, "Hi Kevin." Then have Kevin touch your bracelet and say, "It's Mommy."

### **Reinforce with touch**

Whenever possible, let your child touch the objects you're talking about. As you're walking down the street, ask passersby if your child can touch their dogs. Visit your local fire station and touch the fire truck. The more information they gather through their fingertips the more they'll understand.

### **Get your child involved**

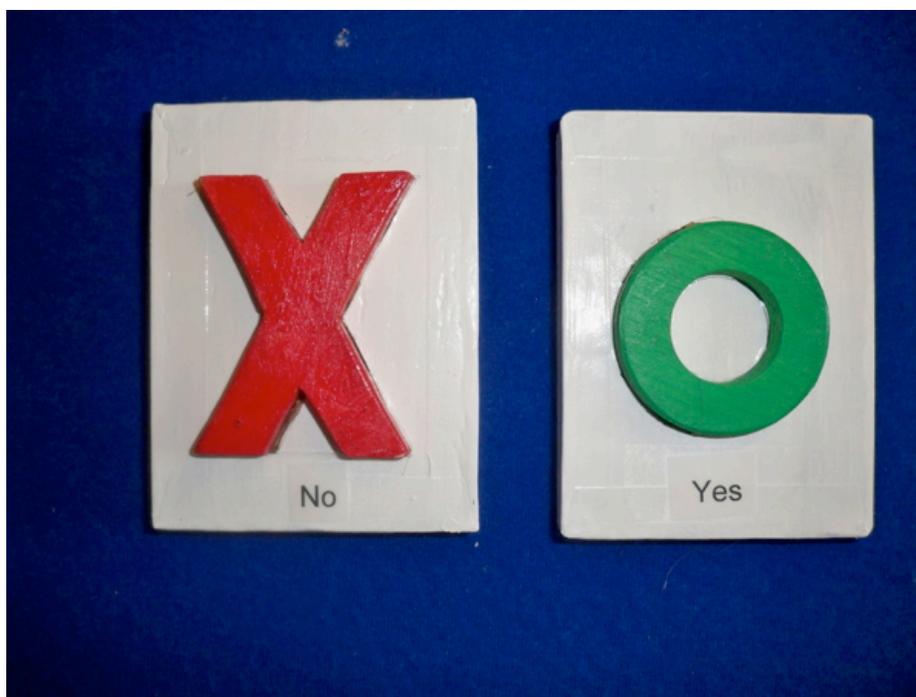
As you move about the house doing things, tell your child what you are doing and get her involved in the process, too. Tell her that mommy is "getting out a bowl for cereal" and show her the cupboard and the bowls. Help her explore with hand-under-hand technique. Show her the bowl and move your hand under hers so she can see how to find the inside of the bowl.

### **Establish predictable routines**

If your child can predict what's going to happen next, it will be easier for him to recognize patterns and to understand what you are saying to him. Bed times are a great time to set up routines. Ivan sits on the potty, takes a bath, listens to a bedtime song, and then goes to bed. We do this every night, and I think it's really helped him learn to understand the words for potty, bath, and bed.

### **Use symbols**

We also reinforce Ivan's routine with symbols. Our school helped us create simple symbols to represent potty, bath, and bed, using three-dimensional symbols. We tell Ivan what we're going to do then have him touch the symbol. The word paired with the symbol and then followed immediately by the action is a wonderful way to encourage understanding. Plus, learning that symbols can carry meaning is another pre-literacy skill!



### **Encouraging Expressive Communication**

Understanding what's going on is the first step. Your child also needs to learn how to effectively get his or her messages out to you. You know how easy it is for children who are non-verbal to become frustrated when they can't communicate! Here are some ways to help them out.

#### **Use symbols**

Symbols are also a great way to encourage expressive communication. Give your child symbols for certain activities and let him choose one or the other. Offer her the potty symbol and try to get her to tap it before she uses the potty as a way to tell you she needs to go. Yes and no symbols are universal (an O and an X) and can be lifesavers!

#### **Use switches**

Ivan's school uses switches in class a lot. They can record "hello," and when a teacher says hi to Ivan, he presses his switch to respond. They also use it as a way to tell us what Ivan did at school that day. When Ivan gets home we always ask him about his day and he presses his switch to hear a recording of his teacher telling us what he did that day. Ivan *loves* this routine. He wants us to do this over and over!

#### **Use signs**

It may seem counterintuitive to use sign language with a blind child, but it can really work! When Ivan was a baby he learned signs quickly and had quite a large vocabulary. I wrote about our experience on my site: <http://www.wonderbaby.org/articles/sign-language.html>. But since then, he began having seizures and lost all his language skills. We were stuck back at the beginning and went back to signs. It's been slow, but he is

starting to pick them up again, and any bit of communication from him is so valuable! He can now tell me with a simple sign that he wants "more." We're still working on "all done," which is usually expressed by fussing!



### **Try auditory scanning**

Auditory scanning is a process by which your child is offered choices, and when he hears the option he wants, he responds with a head nod, smile, pressing a switch or whatever routines you have established. This can be done electronically with a program that reads through the choices, or by a partner, which is referred to as Partner Assisted Auditory Scanning. It can take a really long time, but can be very effective for some kids, especially those who are more physically impaired. You can watch a video here of a child, Ryan, using the electronic device: <http://www.setbc.org/setbc/access/ryan.html>. Notice that in this video Ryan isn't just making simple statements (I want a banana or I'm tired), but really having a conversation.

### **Pay attention**

As I said earlier, kids who are non-verbal are often communicating in their own limited way, through facial expressions, smiles, fusses, or laughter. Sometimes it's just a matter

of paying attention and knowing your child through and through. Offer your child lots of pauses so he has a chance to process what you've said and respond. It's important to let all caregivers know your child's particular ways of communicating. Developing a Communication Portfolio like this one can help:

[http://support.perkins.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Webcasts\\_Communication\\_Portfolios\\_by\\_Susan\\_DeCaluwe](http://support.perkins.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Webcasts_Communication_Portfolios_by_Susan_DeCaluwe).

### **Allow for choice making**

Making choices is a great first step in learning to be expressive. Even simple choices like, "Do you want to listen to music or read a book?" will give your child the ability to communicate and control what's going on. Try to pair these choices with actual objects or symbols. For example, when I ask Ivan if he wants music or a book, I'll have him touch the stereo remote control and a book. He chooses which he wants by grabbing it. He's getting very good at this game!

I know it can seem hopeless sometimes, and I know you find yourself thinking the same thing I do: "If only he could talk!" But stick with it, and even if your child never acquires language, you can still find a way for him to communicate basic needs and emotions. This will improve your child's quality of life tremendously. And yours too!

### **Resources**

- Language and Communication for Children with Visual Impairments or Blindness: <http://www.perkins.org/resources/scout/early-childhood/language-and-communication.html>
- ASHA: <http://www.asha.org/>
- Creating a Communication Portfolio:  
[http://support.perkins.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Webcasts\\_Communication\\_Portfolios\\_by\\_Susan\\_DeCaluwe](http://support.perkins.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Webcasts_Communication_Portfolios_by_Susan_DeCaluwe)
- Project Salute: <http://www.projectsalute.net/>
- What Do I Do Now? Communication Skills and Strategies for Individuals Working with Children Who Have Sensory Impairment (for children 3-8 years):  
<http://hopepubl.com/proddetail.php?prod=910>
- Remarkable Conversations: A Guide to Developing Meaningful Communication with Children and Young Adults Who are Deafblind edited by Barbara Miles & Marianne Riggio: [http://www.amazon.com/Remarkable-Conversations-developing-meaningful-communication/dp/0965717011/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1274214725&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Remarkable-Conversations-developing-meaningful-communication/dp/0965717011/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1274214725&sr=1-1)

- Auditory Scanning: <http://www.setbc.org/setbc/access/ryan.html>
- Sign Language with People who are Deaf-Blind:  
<http://www.deafblind.com/slmorgan.html>

*Amber lives with her husband and son in Watertown, MA. Originally hailing from Hawaii, Amber and her family moved to Watertown to be closer to the Perkins School for the Blind where her son attends preschool. She has a Master's degree in English from Tufts University and spends most of her "free time" writing about being a parent of a child with a disability on WonderBaby.org or about the family's musical adventures around Boston on BostonChildrensMusic.com. But really most of her time is spent caring for and playing with her little boy.*