As long as I have worked with young children, I have heard both parents and teachers alike encourage children time and again to "use your words." This sentiment expresses what we know and understand about teaching children to express themselves to each other verbally, often as a means of conflict resolution. What I have noticed, though, is that often the skill young children need and often do not possess is the one most likely to prevent their conflicts in the first place: the skill of nonverbal communication.

So, what exactly do I mean by nonverbal communication, and how do young children become skilled in it? According to Knapp and Hall (2002), nonverbal language (or communication) is communication that is produced by some means other than words themselves. It is when we communicate through:

**Nonverbal Communication**
- Sounds or tones
- Closeness
- Body contact
- Facial expression
- Eye movements
- Hand movements
- Head movements
- Appearance
- Posture
- Ways of talking (pauses, rapid speech, etc.)

And, according to Borg (2009), nonverbal communication is the most important skill because human communication consists of 93% body language while only 7% of communication consists of words themselves.

What does non-verbal communication mean for young children? In other words, why will mastering this skill improve their social relations? There are many reasons. Children who have the ability to decode non-verbal communication are more likely to experience immediate as well as long-term social success. On the other hand, "Children with difficulties decoding non-verbal cues have been found to be less popular and more disliked by their peers" (Cooley & Triemer, 2002, p. 742). Children who have difficulty decoding nonverbal cues may continue to pursue negative social interactions with their peers which may lead to even more rejection and avoidance.
Frances is a nationally recognized educator, and is currently the Lead Instructor for the Early Childhood Care & Education Department at Chattahoochee Technical College in Georgia. She has authored two NAEYC books including *Big Body Play* (2011), and has directed and produced two DVDs, including *Expect Male Involvement: Recruiting & Retaining Men in ECE* (2009).

(Monfries&Kafer, 1987). And, long-term, children who experience low levels of peer acceptance seem to be at higher risk for serious life difficulties and maladjustment as adults.

Since this skill is so important for both short-term and long-term social success, how can we support it to ensure every child has the opportunity to develop the strongest non-verbal language skill?

**Infants:** We know that infants begin using non-verbal communication from birth through social referencing. In social referencing, infants take their cues from others’ faces and body reactions to gage how to act and what emotions to feel. Infants also communicate with their caregivers through the use of a variety of non-verbal techniques like different pitches of cries, facial expressions, and body posture. It is as important for the adult to learn to read the baby as it is for the baby to learn to read others.

**Toddlers:** With toddlers, continue to use gestures with new vocabulary. Make sure your voice tone and facial expression match your words when communicating with toddlers. Also, make sure you have face-to-face contact with toddlers so they can see what you are saying non-verbally. Respond to a toddler’s body language. For example, if a child has his arms crossed over his body, you might say, “I can see from your body that you don’t want to stop playing right now.”

**Preschoolers:** With preschoolers, act out emotions (like in Charades) with both facial expressions and body postures and ask children what emotion you are displaying. Children can tell stories from picture books based on what they see in the character’s facial expressions and body posture. Play "Simon Shows" where the commands are non-verbal gestures instead of words.

These techniques and so many others can help children learn to decode. And, as children increase their ability to communicate non-verbally, their social success also increases.

References:

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**Frances Carlson at the 2015 ECDA Fall Conference**

Frances Carlson was a facilitator at the 2015 ECDA Fall Conference. She delivered a variety of highly relevant and in-demand workshops to conference participants, including the following:

**Touch & Attachment: Infants & Toddlers**

A child’s need for touch is a significant and vital need, and is as great a need as the need for food, water, and shelter. For infants and toddlers, especially, appropriate touch is an essential component of healthy, secure attachment. Yet, often young children lack sufficient appropriate touch, especially in group care settings.

**Big Body Play: Why Something So Scary is So Good for Children**

Big body play – the boisterous, loud, often rowdy, and always physical play style young children love, and seem to crave. Learn about the research behind why all children seem to play this way and how doing so supports their overall development. Practice determining appropriate big body play from real fighting, learn how to implement big body play in your programs to support all children’s inclusion.

**The Most Important Language Has No Words**

Become aware of the significance of non-verbal communication in effective peer relationships between young children, and observe and assess children who currently have the skills as well as children who need help in learning and displaying the skills. As children are able to interact with each other in the context of non verbal communication, their social effectiveness will increase.

**Appropriate Sexuality Development**

Before a teacher can fully understand sexual abuse and its symptoms, it is imperative that these same teachers have a full understanding of age-appropriate sexual play and sexuality development. It is also imperative that teachers understand how to recognize the signs of age appropriate sexual play as well as signs that a child may have experienced sexual abuse.

Frances Carlson’s books, *Big Body Play* (2011) and *Essential Touch: Meeting the Needs of Young Children* (2006) are now available in the ECDA member resource library.