

How Beautiful Are the Feet of Those Who Bring Good News

Sharing the gospel is a common mission for every believer. But how do we share the Word with someone who has limited use of language? This is a question anyone sharing the gospel needs to answer. To begin, we need to understand that most communication is nonverbal! Things like talking with your hands, facial expression, emojis, or *italicizing* or **bolding** words all convey more than simple words can provide. But communication is a two-way street. So, what are some ways our nonverbal friends communicate?

Body Language

While we don't want to over-interpret body language in a global sense (crossed arms don't always mean someone is standoffish), we can learn what an individual's body language means. You may need time to learn to speak your friend's body language, but be assured, their posture is saying something!

Tone

Even wordless vocalizations convey meaning through their tone. Many parents can tell the difference between their baby's cry for a diaper change and being hungry. When you pay attention, these subtle nuances become apparent! Understanding requires focus and effort, but it is possible.

Facial Expression and Eye-Contact

To the Western world, steady eye-contact and a smile seem to be the most natural way to show someone you're friendly and engaged. But this is not always the case! In places like Korea, extended eye-contact between people is sometimes viewed as rude. The way eye-contact is used is largely a cultural matter. And for some people, such as those with autism, eye-contact can feel uncomfortable and unnatural.

Language Support

Sometimes, we can help supply words to promote communication. This may be as simple as asking "yes" or "no" questions. One church invites non-verbal children to participate in Bible memorization by arranging laminated words in the right order to indicate understanding. Assistive technology such as a story board, a yes/no board, or an iPad using software like Proloquo that verbalizes their thoughts can assist with communication.

Nonverbal people still have a lot to say, and a lot of ways they can say it. But how can we effectively communicate back? Communication is, after all, a two-way street.

Communicating With People Who Are Nonverbal

After listening, we need to learn to communicate clearly. How can we help make our message as clear and easy to understand as possible?

Establish Trust and Friendship

There's an old adage that says, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." When you establish a relationship by spending time together, playing a game, and engaging their interests, you open the door to fruitful communication. Enter their world. A strong relational foundation not only invites people to listen to what you say but gives you a chance to observe the ways they communicate and respond to communication. Listen before you talk!

Use Simple, Concrete Language

Sometimes, less is more. Many (but not all) nonverbal people have an intellectual or developmental disability. In these cases, identify what is essential to understand the lesson or story you are sharing. Describe things literally using real life examples. Avoid metaphors and hyperbole. Instead of saying, "Invite Jesus to live in your heart," say, "Ask Jesus to be a part of your life so you can think and act like him."

Use Symbols, Icons, and Pictures

A picture is worth a thousand words, especially when describing abstract concepts. A visual timer moves "time" from the abstract to the concrete. A picture of Christ on the cross brings understanding to something we don't see in everyday life. Symbols are another form of communication. We see this intuitively in things like uniforms and name badges. Symbols allow you to communicate information like, "Anyone wearing a red lanyard can help," or, "Anyone holding the talking stick is allowed to speak."

Engage Multiple Senses

Engaging more than one of the listener's senses when telling a story or teaching a lesson will help them remember. Some people respond to tactile experiences more than oral communication. You can show them a mustard seed when teaching about faith or let them hold a ball of wool when talking about a shepherd. Putting a Bible verse to a melody helps almost everyone learn and memorize scripture more easily.

Leave Space for a Response

Most of us struggle with awkward silences. But allowing a moment of silence to stretch can be what's necessary to give your friend a chance to respond and communicate.

The most important thing to remember that general expertise about "nonverbal communication" is secondary to specific expertise on an individual. Learning how individuals communicate and receive communication is the most important thing you can learn. So be patient, be willing to ask questions, and pray!