

Teaching Without Talking

Teachers need to be aware of more than just the words they speak to children. They also need to monitor the nonverbal messages that they're sending to



students through proximity, eye contact, gestures, and touching.

By Jacqueline Hansen

If you add up all the words they speak in a day, Americans speak an average of about 10 to 11 minutes. Surprised? Then consider that the average sentence lasts for only about three seconds. When people interact with others but aren't talking, they're still communicating nonverbally. Indeed, up to 90% of what people say and feel is communicated through their actions, not their words.

Children learn both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies by imitating parents, teachers, and other significant people in their lives. However, most American parents converse with their children for



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A SOPHISTICATED PRIMER

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Leave the desk behind.

only about 38 minutes per week. In contrast, teachers might communicate with children for up to seven hours each weekday.

Each day, teachers send innumerable verbal and nonverbal messages to students. When teachers' verbal messages are incongruent with their nonverbal behaviors, students will believe what they see instead of what they hear. Teachers, therefore, can never be sure their students received the intended message. Most teachers choose their words carefully, but they also need to monitor the messages that their bodies are sending to students through proximity, eye contact, gestures, and touching. Furthermore, teachers need to learn the different body languages associated with the cultures represented in their increasingly diverse classrooms. Teachers must learn how to teach without talking.

PROXIMITY

Teachers demonstrate how they feel about students and colleagues by adjusting their interpersonal distance. People create body bubbles separating themselves from others. The size of these invisible barriers varies according to the individual's culture, age, and personality and the intimacy of the relation-

ship. Most Americans and Northern Europeans prefer to socialize at arm's length. Asian individuals stand even farther apart, while Latinos and Middle Easterners stand very close together so they can touch their companions and even breathe the same air. To accommodate these differences, teachers need to eradicate their "spatial accents" and adjust their conversational distance according to students' and parents' cultural backgrounds.

Children's perceptions of social and public space develop gradually as they interact with peers, family members, and teachers. From birth to two years, children communicate in the intimate zone, a few inches away from their companions. Preschool and primary children learn to communicate at a personal zone, two to four feet apart. As they mature, children learn that the more they like their conversational companion, the closer they stand. They gradually embrace their culture's preferred proxemics.

Teachers' proximal boundaries are determined by their cultures, personalities, and relationships. When contact-oriented teachers interact with close friends or comfort students, they invite others into their intimate space so they can touch and converse privately. They increase rapport by directly facing students,

maintaining eye contact, sitting at the same plane level, and leaning toward students to decrease physical and emotional distance. Teachers conduct informal, friendly conversations within arms' length so they can still touch students and monitor facial expressions.

Most classroom interaction takes place at a distance of four to seven feet. At this proximity, teachers use conversational voices, minimize touching, and remain polite but emotionally distant. Teachers who prefer to eliminate physical contact and reduce emotional connections use a public distance ranging from 12 to 25 feet. Generally speaking, introverts keep people at a greater conversational distance than do extroverts.

Teachers' personalities also affect where they sit during meetings. Leaders often sit at the head of the table. Aggressive people tend to sit facing the door and sit in the middle of one side of the table. Timid people sit at a corner of the table, facing away from the door.

Try occupying someone's usual seat or sit extra close to a colleague and see what happens. First, the "invaded" person will react with rocking, leg swinging, or tapping. Next, the person will try averting the eyes, hunching shoulders, using elbows as barriers, shifting positions, or scooting chairs. If that doesn't work, the next step is to strategically place books or extra chairs as a barrier against the intruder.

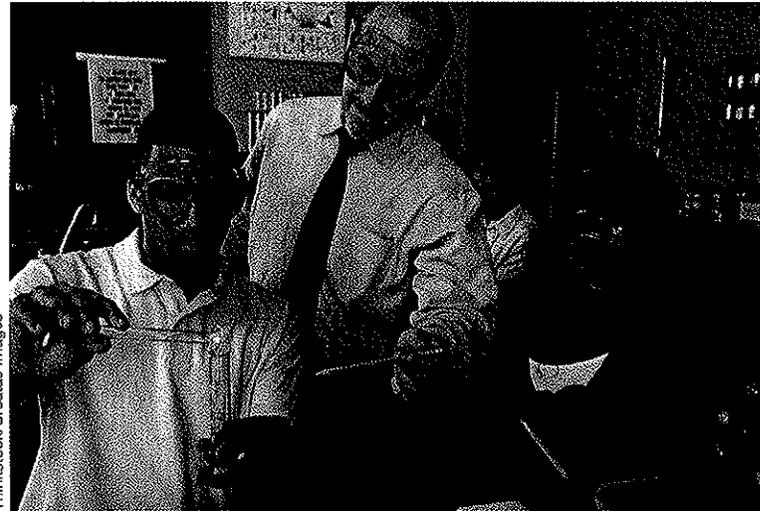
What are some ways teachers can use proximity to enhance their classroom communication?

1. Leave the desk behind. Stand among the students. Sit side-by-side with parents when conferencing to indicate that they're partners in their children's education.
2. Maintain eye contact and greet students, staff, and other educators in the hallway to demonstrate respect and build relationships.
3. Stand near every student every day to increase accessibility, build relationships, and monitor students' academic and behavioral progress.

EYE CONTACT

Some teachers minimize eye contact to maintain emotional distance from students and colleagues when they're walking down the hall. They establish eye contact about 10 to 15 feet away from the approaching person. Then they look down and away

as they walk closer and eventually pass. This lack of eye contact, or civil inattention, sends the message that the teacher acknowledges the person's presence but doesn't want to communicate.



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People also use facial expressions to communicate their attitudes and feelings. Did you know that the human face is capable of producing 250,000 expressions? Fleeting facial expressions are very difficult to interpret because a single expression can represent a spectrum of emotions. For example, a neutral facial expression could indicate pleasure, respect, thoughtfulness, boredom, or disinterest. So, instead of trying to interpret the entire facial expression, many people focus on the speaker's eyes. Whether eyes are windows to the soul is debatable, but experts agree that people use their eyes as the primary medium for nonverbal communication.

Children learn about facial expressions and eye contact at a very early age. A child who is only two days old can imitate happy, sad, or surprised facial expressions. As children mature, they learn to communicate by establishing eye contact with their parents. Even toddlers recognize the importance of eye contact. When asked to draw people, 75% of American four-year-olds drew people with mouths and 99% of them drew people with eyes. By age five, children can recognize universal facial expressions.

People use eye contact to initiate relationships, conduct environmental scans, and regulate conversations. The amount of eye contact varies according to the person's gender and culture. Females tend to maintain eye contact longer than males, regardless of their feelings toward the other person. Hispanic females hold eye contact longer than females of most cultures. Americans, Canadians, Englishmen, Eastern Europeans, and Jewish people prefer face-to-face interactions. Increased eye contact communicates to others that the person is dynamic, approachable, extroverted, sociable, and believable. Saudi Arabians

Stand near every student every day.

GESTURES

People use hand gestures to expedite social interactions and to transmit information, feelings, or attitudes nonverbally. The cultural context, dialogue, intonation, and facial expression affect the interpretation of the gesture. Swimmers synchronize their movements with underwater signals. Brokers gesture to bid on the New York Stock Exchange. Coaches signal baseball players. Speakers use gestures to emphasize their key points. Spouses notify one another when they're ready to leave a party. Military officers indicate soldier placement during maneuvers. Teachers use attention-getting signals.

The number of emblematic gestures used in different countries varies, ranging from less than 100 gestures in middle-class America to over 250 in Israel. Although many gestures are universal, each country has unique gestures. When immigrants become acculturated, they adopt gestures from both countries. Indeed, some bilingual speakers use different gestures depending on which language they are speaking at the time.

To honor their students' cultural diversity, teachers need to be cognizant that gestures have different meanings in different cultures. Here are a few examples:

Beckoning. Americans put their palms up and repeatedly curl their fingers to beckon another person. Yugoslavians and Malaysians use the same motion to beckon animals; Indonesians and Australians use it to solicit women of ill repute. Latin Americans beckon with a downward arc of the right hand.

Head nod. American speakers move their heads up-down in affirmation and side-to-side in disagreement. People in Bulgaria, Greece, former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Iran, and Bengal do it exactly the opposite!

Head tap. North Americans tap their heads with their forefingers to indicate someone is intelligent or crazy, depending on the situation. In Argentina and Peru, a head tap means the speaker is thinking. In Holland, head taps indicate someone is crazy.

Okay. Americans first began forming this sign in 1840 when presidential candidate Martin Van Buren, from Kinderhook, N.Y., was given the nickname "Old Kinderhook," or O.K. It means orifice in Germany, Tunisia, Greece, Turkey, Russia, the Middle East, and parts of South America. In Japan, the okay sign means change. During a goodwill trip to Latin America, Vice President Richard Nixon was booed when he made this gesture because it was considered a sexual insult.

Thumbs up. In ancient Rome, spectators used the thumbs up sign to spare gladiators' lives. In Europe and the United States, it means okay or good job. In Japan, a thumbs up symbolizes the number five, and in Germany, it stands for the number one. It's con-



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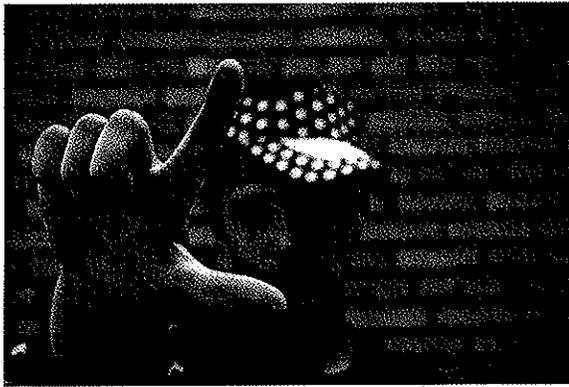
Maintain steady eye contact.

maintain strong eye contact with half-closed lids. Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Puerto Ricans, West Indians, African-Americans, and Native Americans avoid extended eye contact because they believe it's rude.

Eye "gestures" also vary according to culture. People who live in Taiwan and Hong Kong believe that repeatedly blinking one's eyes is impolite. Americans and Europeans wink to indicate they're sharing a secret; people in Hong Kong consider winking a rude gesture.

How can teachers "keep an eye" on their students?

1. Establish frequent eye contact with every student to ensure they're attending and understanding the lesson.
2. Maintain steady eye contact and focus entirely on what the student is trying to communicate.
3. Recognize that some students' cultural heritage might prohibit them from making eye contact with an authority figure, especially when they're being reprimanded.



Keep up-to-date with the meanings of “pop” gestures

sidered a sexual insult in Australia and Nigeria.

The V. Winston Churchill popularized this two-fingered gesture to symbolize victory over Nazism. Since the 1960s, many people use it to signal peace. Teachers use it to seek silence. It means “okay” in Scandinavia, Germany, France, and Italy. When people in Britain make this sign with their palm inward, it’s an obscene gesture. During the Norman Conquest, Frenchmen would amputate English archers’ fingers so they could no longer draw a bow. So when French archers were captured, English soldiers taunted them with their two fingers.

What are some guidelines for using gestures in the classroom?

1. Keep up-to-date with the meanings and usage of “pop” gestures, such as rappers’ hand-signs.
2. Use gestures carefully. Some students might misperceive innocuous gestures; adolescents can find sexual innuendos in almost everything.
3. Use American Sign Language gestures to facilitate classroom management (that is, line up, bathroom, sit down).

TOUCHING

Touching is the most intense and misunderstood form of nonverbal communication. Touching is an intrinsic part of developing the bonds that are necessary for normal social development. Mothers and their infants bond primarily through their shared tactile experiences. Babies learn to touch others and respond to others’ touch through interpersonal ex-

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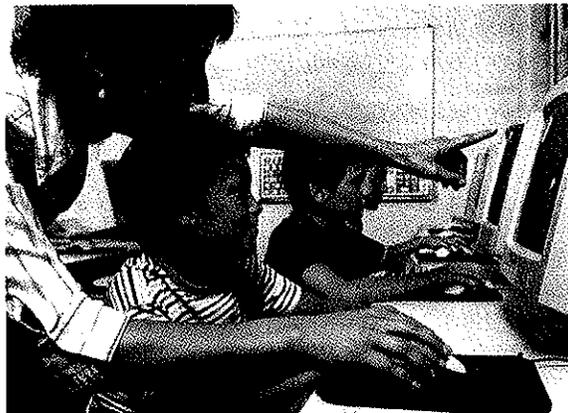
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periences and conditioning. Children begin by touching objects, then objects on people, then people. Children learn to use touch to establish friendly relationships, reduce social distances, and declare a level of intimacy. Appropriate touching evokes comfort, reassurance, and pleasure.

The quality of children's tactual experiences in-

Limit touching to the students' heads, shoulders, hands, and upper backs.



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fluences their abilities to relate to others, to trust them, and to be sensitive to their needs. Children who experience loving tactual experiences visualize themselves as warm, sensitive people. Tactual deprivation cripples people's emotional growth, resulting in shallowness, estrangement, and detachment. Emotionally deprived people are more susceptible to stress and disease, have higher death rates, and are less developed physically and behaviorally.

Compared with other world cultures, Americans seem to be touchy about touching. French parents touch their children three times more often than do American parents. Men in the Middle East, Korea, China, and Indochina and women in Southeast Asia walk arm-and-arm or hold hands without any homosexual undertones. Jewish men are very tactile; they often embrace and kiss. Puerto Rican couples touch about 180 times per hour; French pairs touch 110 times; couples in Florida touch twice; and couples in London don't touch at all.

Unfortunately, there is minimal touching in many American households. In the early 1900s, Dr. Emmett Holt warned parents they would spoil children if they handled them too often, and impersonal child-rearing practices are still prevalent today. Mothers separate themselves from their children with the interposition of bottles, carriages, cribs, and carrier seats. Meanwhile, extended families are scattered across the nation, further reducing the opportunity to be touched by loved ones. Lack of touching has created people who lead isolated lives in a world that's addicted to things. Americans have produced generations of "untouchables."

Most American classrooms have touch-deprived children who exhibit common symptoms: asthmatic

and allergic conditions, speech and learning disabilities, intestinal problems, sallow skin, and small stature. Furthermore, touch-deprived children may grow into young bullies and destructive, violent adults. Although teachers want to reach out to these students, they're warned to "teach but don't touch" their students because of the mistaken belief that all forms of touching have sexual implications. This myth is reinforced through television, movies, and music. The truth is that touching has multiple non-sexual applications as well. Barbers and beauticians groom people; physicians use touch to examine patients; politicians shake hands and hold babies; cashiers touch customers' hands when returning change; and athletes bump bodies and give high fives to celebrate scores. People also use touch for greetings, congratulations, conversational cues, rituals and rites of passage, and play.

Teachers can use *appropriate* touching to communicate affection toward their students and to establish a caring classroom community. Positive, appropriate touching demonstrates that teachers care about students' well-being. In fact, teachers *must* touch children to facilitate their emotional, social, intellectual, physical, and social development.

Here are some tips for teaching through touching:

1. Ask students' permission before touching them. Give them a choice of a hug, handshake, or knuckle-bump. Respect their decision.
2. Limit touching to the students' heads, shoulders, hands, and upper backs. Don't make accidental contact with the "danger zones."
3. Leave the classroom door open and avoid being alone with children.

In today's increasingly diverse classrooms, finding every possible way to communicate with every student is more important than ever. Teachers must become kid-watchers to familiarize themselves with their students' nonverbal communication patterns. They're encouraged to record themselves so they can hear and see their instructional delivery from the students' perspective. What messages are their nonverbal behaviors sending to students? How can teachers adjust their proximity, eye contact, gestures, or touching behaviors to create a positive, supportive learning community? Teachers will be better able to teach what they preach once they learn to teach without talk.

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