

Helping a Nonverbal Child with Communication Needs

Prior to using picture cards, Glenn would “hand lead” me to items or places in the house. For example, he would reach for my hand, I would hold hands with him and follow his lead walking in the house where he wanted to go. If he stopped at the refrigerator, I would open the refrigerator door. He could not speak or point. I already knew what items he probably would want or not want. I would choose one item at a time and place it in my hand out of the refrigerator. Then, I would look at him and ask him if this is what he would like. I also named the item to him in conversation. If I picked up a gallon of milk, holding the milk in front of him I would ask, “Would you like some milk?” He normally made a grunt sound. It was not a clear answer, but because he is my child and I knew him so well, I became inclined to understand what different grunt sounds meant. Some grunt sounds meant yes, some sounds meant no. If his sound meant no, I would place the item back in the refrigerator, and choose a different item to show him. Let’s pretend I showed him a small container of vanilla pudding. I would ask him, “Would you like some pudding?” He would always immediately respond with a grunt sound. Again, his grunt sound meant either yes or no. It was all trial and error with my son daily. Little did I know at the time that for the next several years this is how we would communicate concerning food items in the refrigerator. He was not capable of reaching in the refrigerator for what he knew he wanted, so I needed to guess until I showed him the desired item. I knew this method would reduce the chances of him becoming frustrated because he knew what he wanted, but could not say the word, or point to the specific item in the refrigerator. My goal was always to lessen his frustrations and make everything as easy as possible for him daily being nonverbal.

Hand leading throughout the house everyday was the way we lived for many years because he was nonverbal. Glenn loved water. Water was very soothing because of his sensory needs. He would reach for my hand, and walk into the bathroom, and stand next to the bathtub. I would ask, “Do you want to take a bath and play with your toys?” The grunt sound for the bathtub was always yes. He enjoyed taking a bath and playing in the tub with the fun things I bought him. He had rubber ducks, foam alphabet letters that would stick to the sides of the tub, toy boats, and many other small bathtub toys. His baths were an event in themselves. Water was very soothing to him for his sensory needs. In the tub he always wanted to chew on his washcloth when it was wet while sitting in the bath water. I had a small television in the bathroom mounted on the wall, and he occasionally watched cartoons while playing in the tub. After a bath, he was always very relaxed, and calm. It was very comforting to me as his mother to see him at peace with himself, smiling, and playing in the bathtub. Even though he could not communicate with me in words, we had a very special way of communicating through smiles and facial expressions. I spoke to him all the time, and I believe that is the main reason his receptive language developed so well. My son knew how much I loved him just by looking in my eyes.

Picture cards with the word included were everywhere in our home. Being Glenn was nonverbal, this was an easy way to communicate effectively. I attached Velcro to the back of many picture cards and placed them throughout our home in every room. He knew to stand next to the card, or hand lead me to the card, and I would know what he desired. For some reason, he would not go into a room alone, detach the card, and bring it to me. Our daily routine was hand leading. I was more than happy to hold hands with him and follow his lead to a specific picture

card or item in our home. Communication for him became easy, and his frustration lessened tremendously because I understood him easily.

Occasionally, Glenn would cry and become very frustrated if I could not understand what he was trying to tell me. Sometimes he would be on the floor screaming, fussing, so upset. I felt so sorry for him. There were some rough days at times. I completely understand where some of you are with your child. Extreme patience is mandatory from the parents, family members, and caretakers for nonverbal children. It is difficult for the adults but think about this. Can you imagine how difficult it is for the child who can't speak, but knows what they want to tell you? Also, they do not have writing skills yet, or a technology device to type on that can speak for them. I spent many nights crying on my pillow, divorced single mom, with a bleeding heart for my son just thinking about what he is enduring daily. It was overwhelming at times. I felt it was the darkest of dark times for us, but I never gave up hope and determination to keep fighting against this medical condition called autism.

As a mother, I did not want any regrets when I would be older. Any and everything I learned from reading, strategies and skills I knew from being an elementary teacher for so many years, and new techniques I wanted to try were always my focus all those years from Glenn being three years old until his autism free diagnosis at sixteen years old. So many people can be negative in today's world, give you the pity look, and try to make you believe it is what it is, and the situation will not get better. I am writing this book to tell you as a mother who had a moderate to severely autistic diagnosed son, yes, it can get better. Stay strong as parents, and families, uniting instead of straying from each other, and you will find your child will greatly benefit.

Story book reading was a fun time for us to share. I bought many children's story books, and nursery rhyme books for Glenn. His bedroom had a shelf full of colorful, picture books for me to read to him. Some of my favorite moments with Glenn were when he was a little boy sitting in my lap reading stories to him. Besides reading during the day, every night ended with me reading a book to him, saying a prayer, and giving him a kiss goodnight on his forehead. I always read with enthusiasm, smiles, happy expressions, and excitement. I knew exposing him to pictures and written words were very important for him. I read many books with the alphabet letters, and pictures of nouns that began with the same alphabetical letter. This is where I truly began teaching Glenn about phonemic awareness. He was listening and learning, even though he did not speak.

To continue building vocabulary, I purchased sets of very simple picture cards specifically using nouns. I purposely wanted to introduce nouns to him. Being nonverbal, I felt if he could recognize visually these words it would be beneficial to him long term. A noun is a person, place, or thing. Every day, we would go through a stack of cards containing a picture and the word written underneath. I would show him one card at a time very slowly. For instance, if the picture card had a picture of a dog with the word dog written underneath, I would say to Glenn, "Dog, see the picture of the dog, and we spell the word dog with the letters d, o, g." I pointed with my index finger to each individual letter written on the bottom of the picture card as I identified the name of the letter. I would let him look at the picture and the word for a minute or so, and then continue to the next card. His favorite card was iguana. I do not know why, I always laughed about that. Sometimes I would place cards on the kitchen table and tell him to

hand me his favorite card. He always handed me the iguana card smiling, and I would laugh and smile back at him.

Picture cards were introduced to my son beginning at the age of three, and by the time he was five years old he could finger spell nouns to me for us to communicate. It was amazing! Without me realizing, he memorized the uppercase shape of individual letters of the alphabet and could spell words for me.

At the early age of two years old before Glenn was diagnosed with autism, he loved playing on my computer keyboard in my office at home. I would open a Microsoft word blank document and let him type letters. It was amazing to him watching letters appear on the computer screen by moving his fingers of both his left and right hands.

Alphabet letters were introduced to him at a very young age. Glenn would only finger spell one word, but from that one word, I knew what he wanted me to talk about with him. Usually, he would finger spell next to me on the kitchen table, sofa cushion, carpet, and different flat surfaces throughout our home.

Fingerspelling led me to buying Glenn's first communication technology device. I purchased a handheld device that he could type words. The letters were designed like a computer keyboard. Glenn was very familiar with the computer keyboard. Being the alphabet letters were all familiar to Glenn, and he knew how to spell many simple words from his memorization, this was an easy way for him to communicate. I can remember thinking to myself when Glenn is an adult, and possibly still nonverbal, "How will he communicate simple needs to people in the public? How will he order a hamburger in a fast food restaurant being nonverbal?" I thought there were only two possible choices, either handwriting, or a communicative device with a screen to show others what he typed. Discovering this device was a true blessing. He loved typing, was great at spelling, and could communicate needs and wants much easier. Observing Glenn, I became aware of his self-confidence increasing significantly, and lessened frustration once he was introduced to a communicative technology device.

Educational toys are an important investment for every child. They can have fun while learning! Hands-on activities are excellent choices to enhance the interest of a child. The wooden ABC blocks that look like cubes with pictures related to alphabetical letters are a great start to build vocabulary. As children are continuously introduced to the alphabet, pictures, and words they begin to understand how letters and words relate to things. I credit spending so much time with Glenn practicing and learning new words every week for years for the development of his extensive receptive language ability.

Glenn spoke his first word at the age of six. His first word was mom. His second word was no. His third word was yes. Hearing Glenn say just one word to us was a huge milestone. I continued working with him daily with picture cards, visuals and images, numbers, shapes, and educational manipulatives. As he continued to pronounce different syllables, he often skipped the first consonant sound of the word. If the word was Matt, his brother's name, he would say, "at." Knowing Glenn so well, I could distinguish what word he was trying to say. Teachers, therapists, other children, and adults normally did not understand him. At the ages of seven and

eight years old, Glenn began to say two to three-word phrases, (I'm hungry, I like cake, want a bath, want my bed, watch tv). Around nine years old, Glenn began speaking in complete sentences. He did not speak often, but he was saying sentences. He was almost eleven years old before he could maintain a conversation, with both speakers talking back and forth to one another. His journey to verbal speech was slow, but it was happening.

After many years, a mother's desperate prayer was finally answered. During eighth grade Glenn was in an organization at his junior high school and participated at a conference held in the city with other schools and adults. He spoke at a podium that day, all alone, without stuttering, and clearly spoke the words he was to convey to the audience. That day was one of my happiest and proudest moments of my son. His teacher took a video of him on her cell phone, and later that day sent it to me via text. I watched with amazement, happy tears, and gratefulness as I remembered that little boy for so many years who could not speak at all. *Speech was conquered!*

People who meet Glenn would never know he was completely nonverbal until six years old as a young boy, and ten years old before he was able to communicate in sentences and two-way conversations. His progression has been amazing to watch over the years! His speech is clear, easy to understand, and his personality has certainly blossomed. Glenn has a tremendous sense of humor. We laugh a lot together and have a peaceful, happy home!