



## AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST

### EPISODE 58: HE CAN'T TALK

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode58>

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve, for more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education, but my real love is helping special educators. Like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm so glad you decided to join us. I am Chris Reeve and I'm your host. And today I want to start with a story.

So I'm standing in a classroom or some other similar facility, and I'm here to observe and make suggestions about a child who is primarily non-verbal, I'm interacting with that child. I'm talking to him when another student comes up and says he doesn't talk. And I say, I know it's okay. I'll talk to him. And the other kid says, but really he doesn't, he doesn't talk. And I say, it's okay, I'm going to go ahead and talk to him. And he's like, he just looks at me like, well, you don't get it. He doesn't talk.

This situation has happened to me more times than I care to count. It always sticks with me because it makes me realize that when people don't talk verbally as a society, we tend to think that they can't understand what we are saying. And we stopped talking to them. This means that a student who's already isolated by not being able to communicate effectively with others. Expressively now is often surrounded by silence and people don't interact with him or her. And this message is pretty elemental when it's preschoolers and kindergartners, essentially saying to me that since their classmate doesn't talk, I shouldn't be talking to him or her.

And I think that's sometimes the message that we send. And we want to be really careful about that. So in today's podcast, I want to share five things that we need to think about in communicating with a nonverbal student. It is probably the question that I get asked most frequently in some form or another is how do I work with a student who's non-verbal many of us work with students who do not have a way to communicate effectively and don't speak. And we also sometimes work with students who communicate in alternative ways like through a device or pictures or sign language.



So in this episode, I am going to talk about five tips for making sure that we continue to build the communication of our students who are non-verbal as well as some things to think about in interacting with them and including them in our classes. Sure. That our students understand that just because they don't talk doesn't mean that we don't want to talk to them and I have a free download for you. So if you hop over to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode 58](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode58), you can sign up for the free resource library and grab the free download as well as a transcript and all of the information about the podcast itself. So let's get started.

Let's start a little bit with what our research tells us about individuals who are non-verbal. We have research that supports the fact that when a person is non-verbal people talk to him or her less than when a person is verbal. And there's also research to suggest that when the person has a way to effectively communicate, whether that's with speech, pictures, speech generating devices, or other means people talk to them more. The less that people talk to you, the less you learn and the less opportunity you have to practice communication. And obviously this situation makes a bad situation worse. So the other piece at what the research tells us is that we tend to underestimate the academic skills of individuals who are non-verbal. And so people are not as challenging to them. They are not engaged in more complex language with them. And we also know that if our students are non-verbal and using a device or pictures that are modeling with that strategy is going to be an important communication tool for them.

So let me share my five tips on how we help non-verbal students to participate and communicate effectively in our classroom, and how do we help our, their peers and other adults see them as communicative partners. So these are basically five top things I want to share with teachers and families who might be new to working with students who are not verbally proficient. But they also are strategies that I think it's important that we make sure that our staff and our students are really aware of.

So the first one is that we want to talk to the student like he's a typical kid. We want to make sure that we're including him or her in our conversations with other students. We want to make sure that we're sending the message to the other students in the class, that this student is a communicative participant in our classroom.

And we can do that in a variety of different ways. We can ask them questions that have non-verbal answer. So if they're not yet proficient at using an augmentative communication strategy, we can ask some questions that they can respond to non-verbally. So things like yes or no, or giving them a choice board or pictures that they can point to or exchange if they can't discriminate between pictures, give them one



picture and ask them the question that just involves answering that by gesturing to that one picture. So essentially make it an errorless task. This sends the message to that student that he is communicating. It keeps him participating in class, but it also sends a message to his peers that he is included and any communicative partner in the class.

Second, we want to make sure that we're actively educating peers, talk to your other students to remind them that just because he or she can't talk doesn't mean that we shouldn't talk to him or her. If you set the example of doing it, it won't be hard for them to remember that lesson. So it's really important that we are sending that message and being clear. So we might use books, uh, as well as just social stories or, uh, discussed discussions about talking to someone who doesn't talk back. The third is to make sure that we are talking to them, to we're talking to the student who is non-verbal remember that the student can most likely, still understand you even know he or she can't talk.

We also want to be careful about talking about him in front of him, because again, just because he isn't talking doesn't mean that he doesn't understand, even if his receptive language is significantly compromised, he still picking up on the tone, the non-verbals, the other kinds of things.

So we don't want to send the message that we think that he's not there, that he's invisible. Think about whether you would say the same things around a typical child or not. And it's important as well that we make sure that the staff understands this. We need to be very explicit in helping them to understand it.

So the freebie that I have for you today in the blog post is actually a reminder poster about these things. So it's just a way to share it with the staff. You could share the transcript of this podcast and you can download both of those at [autismclassroomresources.com/episode 58](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode58). Next, we want to make sure that we're giving our students who are, non-verbal a communicative role. Give him a role in your classroom that he can do without talking. For instance, instead of being the calendar helper in a kindergarten class, he could be the pointer for the activity.

Think about your daily schedule and try to come up with at least one way that this student can participate in each activity as an active member. What can he do besides sit and listen?

You might incorporate some speech generating device switches into it, so that he is able to say the phrase of a common book that you're reading. So when you get to that phrase, he hits the switch and he is reading. You might use it as a way to have him tell you how he is in the morning or tell you what the date is as the calendar helper. You can also employ devices that aren't necessarily his personal device, like a



simple, single big Mac or a single speech generating device switch that can help him with that.

And finally, most important, we need to give the student communication tools to be able to communicate. So we may need to make a referral for an augmentative communication evaluation, because that is an expert who is going to know what kind of device seems to best fit him. And they can do a trial. It may be that we are starting him off with pictures and the picture exchange communication system. You want to make sure that you are engineering your classroom, so those communication tools are available to him throughout the day.

I have a set of communication boards, for instance, that are designed specifically for activities around the classroom that can be posted or shared or used as a picture exchange. And I'll make sure that the link to that is in this blog post as well. But you might also use something like the Picture Exchange Communication System to get him started. But even if we haven't decided on what device to use for him, we need to make sure that we are including ways for him to communicate regularly throughout every activity of the day.

And finally, I want to end with a story since I began with the story. I used to work with an assistive technology team after I left internship, and I was providing consultation to 16 counties in, central North Carolina. And we were in a small town with a woman who was non-verbal and she was an adult. She was probably in her 40s. She really wasn't interacting with people. People were not interacting with her in her workshop. We were visiting her. We gave her a device and immediately everyone was talking to her. They all flocked over to her. And the other clients were saying things like "she can talk, listen, she can talk." And they were using the device to talk to her. So they were modeling it, which was amazing. And this all happened spontaneously. We didn't tell them anything. We didn't teach them anything.

So sometimes just giving a student a voice, even if they aren't using it as effectively as we'd like them to changes, people's expectations of them. And when we do that, they have more opportunities to practice talking and communicating. They have more opportunities for socialization, for making friends and so much more. So that's one of the reasons why this is a topic that is near and dear to my heart.

Definitely head over to the blog post at [autismclassroomresources.com/episode58](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode58), grab the downloads, the visual for communication and the poster of reminders as well as you can get a transcript and all of the links there, as well as the links to my communication boards, if there's something you think would be useful in your classroom.



If you're an educator, I would love to hear how you work with and encourage communication with your students who are non-verbal. So head on over to our free Facebook group at [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection) that answered the questions, and we would love to have you as part of that. And finally, if you're looking for more ideas about how to teach communication skills, come give the special educator Academy a try. If you haven't already, you can get a seven day free trial at [specialeducatoracademy.com](https://www.specialeducatoracademy.com). Thank you so much for tuning in today. Thank you for everything you do. And I hope to see you again next week.