

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communications Domain

Nonverbal communication skills are defined as the ability to communicate meaning without the use of language. Two-thirds all of communication is estimated to be nonverbal.¹ Nonverbal communication can include how words are spoken (tone, pitch, pace), body language (gestures, facial expressions, posture), non-language sounds (whistling, clapping, sighing), visual cues (symbols, motions), and tactile responses (touching). According to Burgoon and colleagues,² the three purposes of nonverbal communication are to:

1. Convey emotions and attitudes behind spoken language,
2. Support or compliment words, and
3. Replace verbal communication.

Most non-verbal communication skills are acquired through development and interactions with others. Culture can have a big impact on importance and interpretation of nonverbal cues. Volunteers should use nonverbal communication to foster an environment of belonging and encouragement. Intentional use of nonverbal cues is positively correlated to the receiver's ability to understand the meaning conveyed by the cues.³ In addition, emerging leaders are greatly affected by positive or negative nonverbal feedback, which can influence their motivation to continue in leadership roles.⁴ As a caring adult mentor, you can reflect supportive emotions and positive attitudes in your nonverbal cues during both listening and speaking. Positive nonverbal communication cues you can use to convey active listening include:

- **Pleasant facial expressions** – maintaining good eye contact, nodding, and natural smiling.
- **Interested body position** – keeping enough distance for personal space, and a relaxed body position leaning towards the speaker, arms not crossed over the body, and a normal breathing rate.
- **No distracting gestures** – checking a watch or phone, stretching, yawning, or glancing away.

Nonverbal cues you can use as a speaker include:

- Intentional use of tone, inflection, and pace;
- Consistency between verbal and nonverbal communication – the words and cues should send the same message;
- Occasional use of visual aids to illustrate complex concepts, reinforce important details, or conceptualize abstract thoughts – gestures, images, characterizations, etc.

You can also put your nonverbal communication skills into action by interpreting the cues of others. Feedback from an audience can indicate shared meaning or a disconnect. For instance, a classroom full of smiling students with nodding heads may indicate they are paying attention and engaged with you; whereas, students with their heads on the desks or are doodling may have very little engagement. You can take these nonverbal

cues from an audience as a whole and not focus too much on a single cue or behavior. It could be that someone checks their phone because of a timing alert for a medication reminder or a person doodles or puts their head down as part of their individual learning style to block out other distractions. It is okay to ask questions or seek clarification if someone's verbal and nonverbal communication are not matching up. Asking questions is a way to build

relationships, understanding, and intercultural competence. Be mindful of nonverbal communication expressed by yourself and others. Nonverbal communication skills are important for 4-H volunteers to communicate effectively and create a sense of belonging in the audience they work with. Be aware of the impact of nonverbal communication and use it intentionally to convey meaning, build relationships, and facilitate positive youth development.

Creating a Sense of Belonging:

While some nonverbal communication transcends culture (i.e., laughing, crying), other actions are subject to interpretation. For instance, eye contact with an adult can be considered a disrespectful action by youth in some Eastern cultures and sticking up the middle finger is obscene in most Western cultures. Be aware of how youth respond to your nonverbal communication and, when in doubt, ask questions when communication is unclear.

References:

- ¹Burgoon, J. K., L. K. Guerrero, K. Floyd. (2016). "Introduction to Nonverbal Communication". Nonverbal communication. New York: Routledge. pp. 1–26. ISBN 978-0205525003.
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- ³Elfenbein, H. A., & Eisenkraft, N. (2010). The relationship between displaying and perceiving nonverbal cues of affect: A meta-analysis to solve an old mystery. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 301-318.
- ⁴Morgan, W.B., and E.B. King. (2012). An Activity for Teaching the Effects of Nonverbal Communication. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2012, 20-31.

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Authors (September 2022)

T. Ashley Burns, Ph.D., Clemson University

Jen Lobley, University of Maine