

Louder than words!



When there's nothing left to say, why not try a little non-verbal nudging to encourage your children to behave, says

Paul Dix...

Words often wash over even the most beautifully behaved. Thankfully, children love the ritual and rhythm of non-verbal communication and play. From clapping routines that calm the room, to agreed hand signals for agreed actions, you can teach behaviour and save your voice. "Eyes on me" is a key instruction – performing non-verbal techniques without anyone looking at you may not

work out well. It works because it is an observable behaviour, whereas "Listen to me" is not. It also demands that the children turn their faces towards you. Of course, you can never really be sure that they are listening. They may be looking directly at you and be deep in thoughts of food/Spiderman/cuddly giraffes, but "eyes on me" is as good as you are going to get!

If you are going to teach children a set of agreed hand signals, you might want to use recognised sign language (britishsignlanguage.com) rather than create your own quirky version. Whilst it might be fun to have personalised signals, it leaves the next practitioner they work with unable to pick up from where you left off. Create a display in the room that highlights the signs that the group are learning this week. Use signs in different areas of the room to remind the children of the rules/agreements. Put up photographs of the children's hands signing or hang 3D hand signs from the ceiling. You may not be able to teach the children the whole alphabet, but with a few useful phrases you can adjust behaviour with flair. Time it right and you can impress waiting parents with your seemingly Mary Poppins-esque wizardry.

Puppet play

You may prefer to route some of your non-verbal communication through puppets or your own characters. Costume cues are great for creating characters that can emphasise different levels of formality or signal the start of

Non-verbal techniques engage the children, demand their full attention and give you another palette of **behaviour management** strategies to **experiment** with

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different routines. The bowler hat for very strict, silent lining up. The funny yellow rain hat for tidying up the paints. The thinking cloak for some really hard thinking time. The beard, moustache and magnifying glass for searching or investigating 'The Case of the Missing Thingamy'. A coat stand with key bits of costume means that you can introduce the children to a range of cameo characters to support your consistent role.

Puppets are immediately magical to most children, but for some they can be too sudden and frightening, so they need to be introduced gently. Visit puppetsbypost.com – they have some lovely friendly monsters. Puppets are often at their most engaging when they are controlled at a slower pace than the speed of the children. The appearance of the puppet can over-excite, so you might want to set a routine that ends with the puppet waking rather than one that starts on its command. Try "The puppet only wakes up when the room is clean and tidy" or "You can say hello to the puppet when you have got your coat on". Use the puppet as a timekeeper for the activity or to silently model correct behaviours. If you don't fancy performing costumed characters yourself then have a few bits of costume to dress the puppet in, to change the emphasis or signal transitions between activities.

When you stop talking, the children immediately know how to communicate with you. They know how to play that game. I wonder how long you can lead the children

find out more

Paul's Online behaviour management course for nursery staff is flexible, interactive, contains original video and the largest behaviour management resource library on the web. For a demo of the course go to pivotaleducation.com/online-demo or call Ellie on 020 7000 1735.



The right signals

SIX RITUALS TO KEEP THEM CALM AND QUIET...

- 1** Use a countdown from five embellished with positive reinforcement: "Five, that's lovely, Sian, you have sat on the carpet already. Four, brilliant, Ryan", etc.
- 2** Use a clapping rhythm that the children clap the response to. Repeat the rhythm three times until all the children are clapping as one and then have their "eyes on you".
- 3** Countdown timer video. There are loads on YouTube of different lengths with fun characters/designs.
- 4** Use different musical cues for different routines: lining up, gathering on the carpet, washing hands, tidying up.
- 5** Use your own movement as a signal to the children. Perhaps they could copy your tai chi moves or yogic pose.
- 6** Silent football. Draw a football/beach ball in the air with your fingers. As the children are thrown the imaginary ball they fall silent and join in the game. Try headers, off the shoulder, slow long passes, etc.

without speaking? Ten minutes? Twenty, 40? How many new non-verbal signals will you agree or rehearse? Giving the children time in the day where everyone is relying on non-verbal communication sharpens their skills and yours. It also gives those who are usually quiet a time in the day when they are equal: a time when the loudest children are not the first to be heard. Try a bit of action research and time how long you can safely work with the children without speaking. See how long it takes before they pick up on the game and speak to you in signs.

Body language

Your non-verbal communication is also critical when children's behaviour must to be corrected. The safe verbal ritual that you initiate can be accompanied with non-verbal cues that help to reinforce the message and embed new routines. Where you sit for the conversation, the face of disappointment that you have rehearsed so well, and emphasising your agreement with a reassuring handshake are all part of your repertoire. Matching your language with clear visual hooks will help you to remind the child later on about the new behaviours that you want to see.

Leading children is a performance that is enhanced by your non-verbal embellishments. As you conduct the children to silent and happy compliance you are one step nearer to NNN (Nursery Nurse Nirvana). While you bask in the glow of outstanding practice, be content that you have taught the routines for good behaviour that stay with the children long after they have outgrown your room.