



Students with Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

By: Jean M. Foss (1999)

This group of disabled learners has only begun to receive the understanding and attention they require. To understand the difficulties they face and to help them to make the best of their assets while minimizing the effects of their weaknesses, we need to recognize the syndrome and its implications.

There is potential for confusion in the term "Nonverbal Learning Disability." This term refers to the fact that these individuals do not process accurately information which is not verbal/linguistic in nature - conversely, they rely almost exclusively on their interpretation of the spoken or written word. This interpretation tends to be concrete, often appears to be rigid and lacking in flexibility. We infer that this lack of flexibility is a result of failure to incorporate information of a nonverbal nature into their understanding. Such nonverbal information includes tactile, kinesthetic, visual-spatial, affective, experiential information which this learner does not perceive readily and, therefore, does not associate nor integrate with language. These individuals may speak volumes; their expressive language tends to be concrete and to contain excessive detail; their conversation shows little or no evidence of consideration of the interests or needs of the audience.

Statements like the following are often true of individuals with a nonverbal learning disability:

- They talk a lot but really say very little.
- They see the "trees" not the "forest."
- They focus on details, do not apprehend the main idea.
- They do not "see the whole picture."
- They do not "read" facial expressions, gestures, or other nonverbal aspects of communication; they miss the subtleties, nuances.
- They may be inappropriate in their social interactions.
- They have few friends; friendships tend to be with older or younger persons rather than peers.
- They tend to process information in a linear, sequential fashion, not seeing multiple dimensions.
- In spite of relative strength in sequencing or recalling sequences, they may confuse abstract temporal concepts; they have significant difficulty recognizing cause-effect relationships.
- They frequently "shut down" when faced with pressure to perform; such pressure might come from too many simultaneous demands, from tasks which seem too complex, or from expectations to perform at a rate which seems too rapid.
- As adults they tend to be underemployed relative to their educational experiences.

We aspire to help these young people to adapt and to achieve fulfillment in their lives. At the outset, we accept that they are eager to learn, to fit in, to succeed, and to do what they can to accomplish their goals. We seek to understand how they learn, to engage them in explicit and direct instruction to remediate their difficulties, and to use their strengths most effectively.

We can be most effective if we do the following:

- Provide verbal mediation for nonverbal experiences, and in conjunction with their interactions with others, whenever appropriate.
- Teach them to use their own verbal analytic strengths to mediate their own experiences.
- Anticipate situations in which they might have difficulty, and act as a buffer and support to facilitate the most positive outcomes possible - help them to anticipate the kinds of situations in which they might have difficulty, and to plan in advance some alternative responses they might have to those situations.
- Teach them to interpret facial expressions, gestures and other nonverbal aspects of communication.
- Teach them to watch for and interpret indications from others that they are talking too much, or that the communication is ineffective in some other way.
- Monitor their understanding when communicating, and teach them to self-monitor their understanding and ask clarifying questions.
- Be particularly careful to ensure their understanding when spatial language is involved.
- Take care to make cause-effect relationships explicit, whenever possible.
- Help this learner to anticipate cause and effect relationships in order to avoid difficulties in many areas of life.
- Teach and practice organizational skills.
- Control as much as possible the demands for performance to be sure they are manageable and not seemingly overwhelming.
- Relying on verbal strengths, help this individual practice and internalize the process of making decisions, setting goals, making plans and taking action to achieve those goals, and reflecting and evaluating the results. The outcome of the process must be to credit oneself for one's own efforts and accomplishments.

Be confident and hopeful; interventions like those above can affect a positive difference.

About the author

Jean Foss, MEd, has been Director of Clinical Teaching and Research at **Pine Ridge School**, in Williston, Vermont, since 1969. She trains remedial language tutors and is involved in assessment and in designing remedial interventions to improve language and communication skills. Jean is a founder, Fellow, and Vice-President of the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators (OGA). She was also involved in organizing the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (IMSLEC), and is immediate past president of the New England Branch of the Orton Dyslexia Society.

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