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What Strategies can I use for my Non-Verbal Child to ease their Transition?

All autistic children experience challenges in communication. While many might have an extensive amount of vocabulary, they may interpret what other people are saying differently and unless taught directly, may not understand non-verbal communication correctly. Children are often confused with every day language's structure; for example, saying "*Jane will do it*" instead of "*I will do it.*"

Autistic children rarely start discussions. This might be linked to having a shy personality, but more often that not it is down to their having problems with understanding social contexts and communication skills. Idioms and sarcastic language, like "*it's raining cats and dogs*" are often taken literally, which can be a frightening prospect for any child to imagine cats and dogs falling out of the sky!

Many children on the spectrum communicate using spoken (**verbal**) words. Others, on the other hand, express themselves through gestures/pointing; eye movements and/or vocalisations. These methods are often referred to as **non-verbal**, meaning that they do not use spoken words to communicate.

It is crucial to remember that being non-verbal does not mean that a person cannot communicate. Rather, they can but do not do so through spoken words.

It is families' and professionals' responsibility to explore ways of communicating with someone who does not use spoken words and make their transition, whether to primary school or another stream, easier.

If your child communicates differently, through gestures, pointing or eye-movement, then you can observe activities and situations, your child is happiest being involved in, and feels most confidence and secure. When selecting a possible school, you can keep in mind what your child has communicated to you, and what you have observed so that the school you select suits your child's needs. You can also consult the strategies suggested in **Becoming Familiar with the School Yourself**.

In preparing your child for starting school, the importance of play; **understanding the school readiness myth and tapping into the power of stories** are also relevant. **Arranging a meeting with your child's teacher** and the questions you need to ask are equally applicable to helping your child in communicating their needs in their new class or school. However you do need to ask also "*What strategies will the school be using to communicate with my child?*"

Communicating with others is a basic human need and it is critical, in consultation with the relevant professionals (such as speech and language therapists), that we develop effective ways for autistic pupils to communicate with us, and for their families and peers to communicate with them. By closely observing a child, we can begin to understand the range of ways they are in fact communicating with us.

A non-verbal individual on the spectrum experiences the same challenges as another autistic child who is verbal in moving to a new unfamiliar situation, so all of the strategies we have referred to can be used also with your child.

Adapted from: <https://asiam.ie/strategies-non-verbal-return-school/> (Accessed on 12th February 2019).

Dr Emer Ring is the Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. As part of our *#BackToRoutine* series for beginning the new school term, she's answered a number of commonly asked questions and concerns families have when starting school.