

The Use of Speech by a Student with ACC--When to Speak, When to Stay Quiet, and When to Push

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In response to a question about Max's verbal skills entering kindergarten, I'd like to clarify a previous note that I made. I had mentioned that when Max* entered kindergarten he was nonverbal, but he wasn't actually nonverbal in that he *couldn't* speak, he just often chooses not to (to this day).

Upon entering kindergarten, he very rarely wanted to use his words, and it took a lot of prompting to get him to do so at all. He was much more likely to use them in social settings, especially because all of the other students would interact with him verbally. But when it came to academics, he typically shut down and tried to find any way not to speak. I would ask him to use his words, and each time I would need to make the judgment call about how much it was worth it to push him. Sometimes I could tell that it was a challenging task and there was no need to try and push him to express himself verbally, when a hand gesture suited just fine. For example, if asking him if he had hung up his coat yielded a nod, that was fine.

It is very possible that it requires him more mental energy to focus his ideas to speak, because his brain has to sort through a number of activities to get to that point. The pathways may not be as direct, especially when extracting memories or thinking abstractly (such as mathematical reasoning). In this way, it could be that it is quite tiring for him to formulate his ideas verbally, and so he does so frugally.

However, in academics it is often important for the student to be able to express their ideas verbally, as you can imagine. And I knew Max could do it, because he did so in social situations. So I would tell him that he needed to use his words, and hold him to that, when I felt it was truly necessary for him to do so. I wouldn't put him on the spot in a group activity, but if I was working with him one-on-one, I would say, 'we need to use our words,' and wait for him until he did so. If he replied with a gesture, I would repeat my request. Sometimes it would be a sitting match until he gave in. It really just takes feeling out the student to see how much patience they have at the time. If I could tell it was going to enrage him, I wouldn't push it. But other times I would just say, 'I understand that by nodding your head you are agreeing with me, but let's use our words. How can you tell me your answer with your words?'

Of course, this takes a lot of patience, and judgment to decide when it's worth it to push the student and when to let them stay within their comfort level. But this very conflict is a main aspect of teaching, especially in young children, so it really just comes as part of the territory when working with any student. You scaffold up to a point, just before their frustration level hits, and then try to work them one step forward, bit by bit.

To this day, Max rarely greets me with a verbal hello. His family always wishes he would say hello, but a hug suits me just fine. I know it is important for children to have strong social skills and know how to greet others, but to me, forcing him to say hello does not seem worth the effort, since I already know that he has this skill. It's at times when I need him to show me that he is grasping the concept that verbal skills are required. If I need him to summarize the text we just read, he needs to speak. If we're playing a game adding sums, he needs to speak. If we're just saying hello and goodbye, what says it better than a hug?

I do not engage in power struggles with children just to win a point. I can't say that enough.

I should explain the way that he expresses himself when he chooses not to use his words. Most of his gestures are pretty standard, such as nods and shaking of the head. He prefers to tap his fist on the page to signal when he has completed reading a passage, rather than verbally telling me so. He does seem more comfortable using hand gestures when his ideas do not seem to need elaboration (such as, I'm done reading this passage). We never made any attempts at sign language, because he doesn't need help in the *ability* to express himself verbally. It's just a matter of enforcing that at times he must give in and speak, even if he doesn't want to.

The funny thing is, if you get him started on a topic that he really cares about, he can talk about wolves or chickens all day. He can actually speak very well and has an extensive vocabulary, and has for some time, because he loves to read. Over the years, he has become much more open to speaking during academic tasks, and needs less prompting. I think there is a level of trust that he knows I will appreciate what he has to say, which gives him more purpose in choosing to speak. If a child knows they are being heard, they'll want to make themselves heard.

*Name has been changed.

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Alexandra is the Managing Director of Boston Tutoring Services, a tutoring company that offers one-to-one in-home tutoring in Massachusetts. She is also a former Kindergarten teacher who also tutors students in grades K-8, in all subject areas, including test preparation.

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