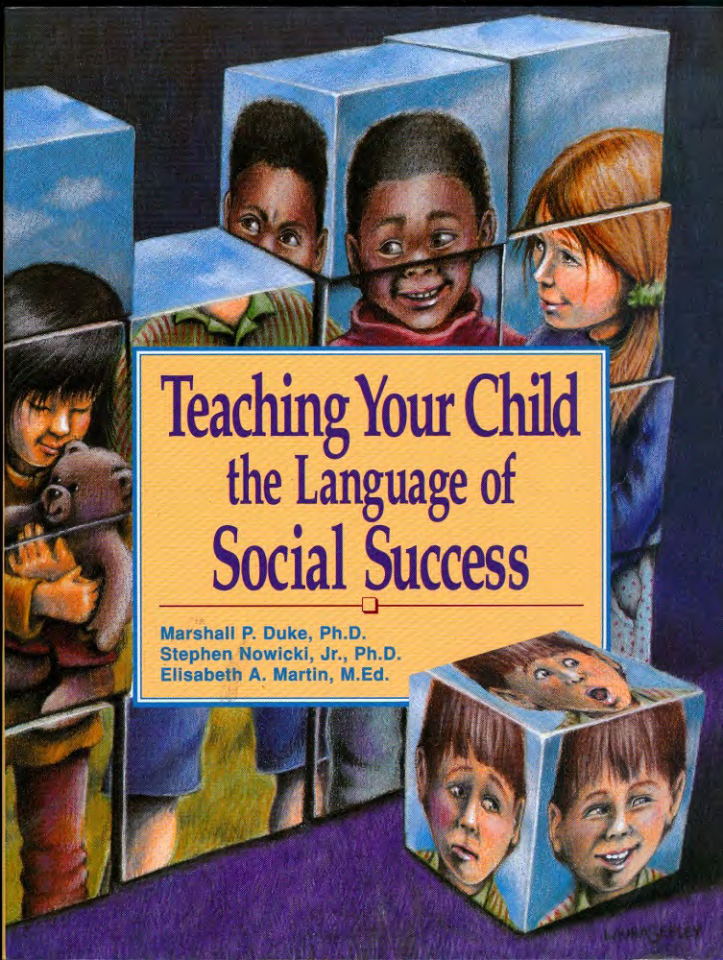


The background of the cover is a collage of children's faces. Several faces are framed within blue, three-dimensional blocks that are stacked and arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth. The faces are of various ethnicities and ages, mostly young children. On the left side, there is a separate illustration of a young girl with dark hair, wearing a yellow shirt, hugging a brown teddy bear. The overall color palette is dominated by the blue of the blocks and the warm tones of the children's skin and clothing.

Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success

Marshall P. Duke, Ph.D.
Stephen Nowicki, Jr., Ph.D.
Elisabeth A. Martin, M.Ed.

TEACHING YOUR CHILD
THE LANGUAGE OF
SOCIAL SUCCESS

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We thank the teachers who have taught us through applying our concepts in their work with children. We thank the children who looked at photos, listened to audiotapes, and walked up to "stimuli" and stopped at comfortable distances. They helped us to learn about the nature of nonverbal language development. We thank our own children and grandchildren for being the laboratory that lives before our eyes.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Everyone knows children who just seem to get life “right.” They are the ones for whom all the lights are green, the ones always invited to parties, always sought after as friends. Their social behavior seems almost effortless as they glide through their daily interactions. Try as they may to be fair, teachers often find such children the most pleasant of all their students and favor them without even realizing it. Research is now showing that these youngsters continue to succeed not only throughout their schooling, but also throughout the rest of their lives.

The British psychologist, Rom Harré, once said that people are like places and, like places, there are some that are so pleasant to visit that you stay long and come back often. Likewise, there are some places that you do not enjoy visiting, that you leave as soon as you can, and that you rarely return to, unless you must. During more than twenty years of research dealing with the qualities that make people “nice places to visit,” we have focused on children who have difficulty establishing and maintaining social relationships, as well as on those for whom the lights are always green.

In our first book, *Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit In*, we addressed the problems of children with identifiable disorders in nonverbal language usage. About 10 percent of children

suffer from deficiencies so severe that they experience social rejection. Another 10 percent demonstrate such an unusually high proficiency in nonverbal skills that they almost always excel in social interactions. *Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success* addresses the vast majority of children in between these two extremes, children who have developed a degree of skill in nonverbal communication, but who need improvement in some areas of this "second language." In this book, we reintroduce the fundamentals of nonverbal communication and build on that foundation to broaden the applicability of our research. We now turn our attention to achieving social success.

Decades of research and clinical observation have led us to believe that we have found a major source of success in children's interpersonal relationships as well as in those of adults. The ability to utilize nonverbal language effectively is the very basis of solid and satisfying social and vocational success throughout life; the absence of this ability is an identifiable and correctable cause of social difficulties.

When we say "nonverbal communication," you may be thinking we mean "body language," and you may be wondering why some children are good at this and others aren't. Well, "body language" is really only a part of nonverbal communication. Indeed, many believe that nonverbal communication is a fully developed language that functions side by side with verbal language. The reason why some children don't learn this nonverbal language, or why many children do not develop it as fully as they could, is that we as parents and teachers rarely teach it formally. While children go to school to learn the grammar of the spoken language, they receive little formal training in the skills of nonverbal language. These skills are typically taught informally (often without full awareness of their importance) by parents and family members, and they are often learned through observation. Since children primarily learn nonverbal language informally, in a hit-or-miss way,

many do not learn as much as they need to—or could—about one or more of the nonverbal rules. Thus, they may not have a thoroughly developed set of the skills that are so basic to social success. They arrive at school armed with their parentally taught and practiced knowledge of the proverbial three “R’s”—reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic—but they may be ill-prepared for the fourth “R”—*relationships*. It is our belief that parents and teachers can help with this fourth “R,” that they can help children to learn the language of interpersonal relationships, and that they can thereby improve their chances for social success and the benefits that derive from it.

In this book, we have attempted to help parents and teachers address this situation in three major ways:

1. by providing information that will allow them to identify forms of nonverbal language;
2. by describing ways in which they can systematically and informally evaluate children’s abilities in nonverbal language usage; and
3. by giving them exercises which can help children develop their fullest potential in nonverbal language and maximize their chances for social success.

THE LANGUAGE OF RELATIONSHIPS



Social success is not always the result of doing certain things. Quite often, it results from *not* doing something, such as not staring at people in an elevator, not touching people in inappropriate places, or not making certain offensive gestures.

A mother and her daughter got on an elevator. The other passengers arranged themselves equidistantly from each other, faced forward, and looked up at the changing numbers. The little girl turned so she was facing the back of the elevator and stared at the passengers, who became very uncomfortable. Her mother told her to turn around and face the door. The little girl asked, "Why?" The mother, who could sense the passengers' anxiety, was hard pressed to come up with a logical answer.



This little girl broke one of the rules of nonverbal communication. The mother knew that her daughter's behavior was inappropriate, but she found it difficult to verbalize the nonverbal etiquette of elevator use.

THE GRAMMAR OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Although the grammar of nonverbal language is unwritten, there are still rules for its use. Sociologist Thomas Scheff labeled these unwritten rules *residual rules*. *Residual rules* are the nonverbal rules for any given situation, and they are usually noticed only when they are broken. They are not written down or formalized, yet we must follow them if we are to make the people around us comfortable, and if we want to "fit in." If we know and apply these rules especially well, we do more than fit in—we succeed socially. As Albert Mehrabian once said, "Verbal cues are definable by an explicit dictionary meaning and by rules of syntax, but there are only vague and informal explanations of the significance of various nonverbal behaviors."

Residual rules cover an immense number of behaviors and situations, and all of these must be learned well if we are to be interpersonally effective. It is difficult to be certain about how, where, and from whom we learn these rules for using proper nonverbal communication. Some nonverbal patterns may be part of our behavioral repertoire at birth. For example, blind and deaf children appear to show socially appropriate facial expressions reflecting emotional states, just as their sighted and hearing peers do. These inborn behaviors are important, but most would agree that the great majority of rules are learned in informal ways.

The very informality of the process, compared to the structured lessons of grammar, often makes the learning of nonverbal skills a hit-or-miss affair in which some children have much training and others relatively little. Great gaps in knowledge can result in broad differences in social success, ranging from the child who moves through life with relative grace and ease to the youngster who is rejected by peers "for no apparent reason." Such gaps can occur in one or more of the following six areas:

- **Paralanguage:** All those aspects of sound which communicate emotion and are used either independently or with words fall into this group. Whistling and humming are paralanguage, as are tone, intensity, and loudness of voice.
- **Facial Expressions:** Facial movements and poses communicate emotion. Effective eye contact and the appropriate use of facial expressions like smiling are two of the most frequently noted characteristics of socially adept children.
- **Postures and Gestures:** Hand and arm movements that communicate meaning are called gestures; positions of the entire body that convey meaning are called postures. Both gestures and postures can convey messages that conflict with spoken words, confusing communication efforts.
- **Interpersonal Distance (Space) and Touch:** We all carry a portable territory and boundaries around with us. If a child stands too close to others while having a conversation, that child is violating the rules of personal space. Similarly, a child who touches others inappropriately, either in terms of the location or the intensity of that contact, is breaking one of the unwritten laws of touch and stands an excellent chance of being rejected without knowing why.
- **Rhythm and Time:** Speech patterns, attitudes, and speed of movement or speech all fall into the category of rhythm. A child from New York City has a different "rhythm" than a child from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Their speech patterns and attitudes are indicative of the differences in their environments. Problems can arise when they are "out of sync" with one

another. This area also includes habits of time management, such as arriving promptly or being late for appointments.

- **Objectics:** Personal hygiene and style of dress indicate that individuals are part of a group, and keep them from being singled out as strange or different. People frequently judge others by the clothes they wear, the way those clothes are worn, and their personal hygiene.

THE VOCABULARY OF COMMUNICATION

Language is basically a set of symbols whose meanings are agreed upon by all those who use them. Thus, an English speaker does not need to have an actual object in hand when

using the word "apple" in order for others to understand what the word means. (Of course, that same object would be symbolized differently in other languages, such as French (*pomme*), German (*Apfel*), or Spanish (*manzana*.) Just as the word "apple" communicates an idea that is held inside the mind of a person, a smile also symbolizes something that cannot be seen—in this case a feeling of happiness or a state of friendliness.

Unlike verbal languages, however, nonverbal "signs," such as smiles and frowns, tend to be more universal.

Linguists tell us that within a specific language, there are two sublanguages. *Expressive language* uses symbols to "encode" messages—to put them into words or other symbols. *Receptive language* is the ability to "decode" messages—to interpret accurately their intended meanings. Expressive verbal language includes the ability to speak or write using words; receptive verbal language involves the abilities to understand the meaning of those words, whether they are spoken or written.

Nonverbal language
is the mother
tongue of the human
relationship.

Expressive nonverbal language is the communication of internal states such as happiness, sadness, or fear, through facial expressions, postures, voice tones, and other methods. Receptive nonverbal language interprets those same signals. It is our belief that nonverbal language has its own vocabulary, just as verbal communication does, but that the two play different roles in our lives. Verbal language is the language of the intellect, of the idea, of the school. Nonverbal language is the mother tongue of the human relationship.

HOW NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION WORKS

When verbal and nonverbal language convey conflicting messages, people almost always tend to believe the nonverbal message. Nonverbal language is usually seen by others as a reliable reflection of how we actually feel. A classic set of studies by Albert Mehrabian showed that in face-to-face interactions, 55 percent of the emotional meaning of a message is expressed through facial, postural, and gestural means, and 38 percent of the emotional meaning is transmitted through tone of voice. Only 7 percent of emotional meaning is actually expressed with words.

The ability to “speak” and to “listen” nonverbally—or the ability to communicate expressively and receptively—allows us to interact with one another more effectively. If we can clearly sense the feelings and attitudes of others, we can relate to them in ways that respect and value their feelings and thereby insure that our needs and wishes are clearly expressed in return. We enjoy being with people who understand us and are easy to understand themselves. Serious misunderstandings can occur if we fail to interpret nonverbal messages correctly, or if we send nonverbal messages that do not accurately reflect our emotions.

Only 7 percent of
emotional meaning
is actually expressed with
words.

Tom decides to go to a movie—a light comedy. After paying for his ticket, he enters the theater and looks around. There are only five other people in the theater, which is large enough for two hundred. Tom walks down the aisle and stops where one person is sitting in the middle of a row. He walks into that row until he reaches the seat next to the stranger and promptly sits down.

What would you conclude about Tom after observing his behavior? We believe that if you focus on his seat selection, you will conclude that Tom is behaving strangely. Think of yourself as being that one person sitting in the middle of a row in a nearly empty movie theater that can hold hundreds of people. What are your conclusions about Tom, and how does he make you feel? If you are like the participants in our workshops, you think that something is psychologically wrong with Tom, and he makes you anxious, uneasy, uncomfortable, and afraid. Tom's nonverbal language is likely to spur you to action—to get up and leave!



When we see someone else make a mistake in verbal communication, we may make judgments about that person's intellectual abilities. In contrast, when we see a person commit an error in nonverbal communication, as Tom did, we are more prone to think of that person as socially inept and even unlikable. We might sympathetically look upon a person who makes mistakes in verbal communication as poorly educated or ignorant. On the other hand, we are likely to regard a person who makes errors in nonverbal communication as strange or weird. Children often apply cruel names to those who—for reasons they cannot ascertain—do not follow nonverbal social rules. While children's levels of verbal ability undoubtedly have something to do with their social success, it is likely that their social success will be affected even more significantly by their nonverbal language skills.

Put more simply, being intelligent or well educated does not automatically make you socially successful—everyone knows someone who provides supporting evidence for this claim! People without nonverbal language skills often seem unpredictable and confusing. Such people may even threaten our feelings of safety and security. People who do not possess nonverbal language skills unknowingly put up a barrier between themselves and others, whereas people who know and follow the rules of nonverbal language make others feel comfortable—they are “good places to visit.”

Another reason that nonverbal communication is so important in our relationships to one another is the fact that, unlike verbal language, which occurs intermittently, nonverbal communication occurs continually. The nonstop nature of nonverbal communication has significant implications for human interaction. Recent surveys indicate that the average person spends less than forty minutes a day in verbal conversation with others. But verbal silence does not mean that nothing is being said; whenever we are around others, we are communicating nonverbally—whether we want to or not. People cannot help being affected by our facial expressions, our posture, or how close we stand to them. Likewise, we cannot avoid being affected by the nonverbal behavior of other people.

Some researchers sum up the nonstop nature of nonverbal communication by saying, “You cannot *not* communicate nonverbally!” Because nonverbal communication is continuous, nonverbal strengths or weaknesses will generally have a greater impact on social interactions than equivalent levels of verbal ability.

- Imagine a boy who mutters, “Let’s be friends.” He is communicating his desire for friends inefficiently; he



sends one verbal signal over the span of only a few seconds, and his signal reaches only a few children within earshot.

- In contrast, think of a girl who always smiles at others while listening intently and making strong eye contact. The entire time she is around people, her expression is communicating her friendliness and attracting others to her. Her signals are much more likely to produce the desired results.

All of us like to be around people who smile at us and who look at us directly and with interest. We cannot help but respond positively. A chain of positive interactions often begins and continues toward exchanged greetings, shared social activities, and eventual friendship. Therefore, those who are adept at nonverbal language stand to gain tremendous benefits, while those who use it poorly seem destined to experience widespread confusion and frustration—without ever knowing the reason why!

You cannot *NOT*
communicate
nonverbally!

Those fortunate individuals who can make friends easily and maintain satisfactory relationships are usually unaware that the source of their prowess lies in their nonverbal communication. Because the reasons for their effectiveness are out of their awareness, they find it very difficult to explain their skills to others. The methods of teaching nonverbal language skills, therefore, have long remained underdeveloped and have eluded the grasp of most parents and teachers.

Since nonverbal behavior and communication are learned, parents and teachers can help teach children the skills they are lacking. Because nonverbal responses are seen as more reliable indicators of our true feelings than verbal responses, paying attention to and understanding the nonverbal social behaviors of

others is an important communication skill to possess (Ekman and Friesen 1971; Mehrabian 1987; Bailey 1995).

When parents, teachers, and support staff are aware of nonverbal communication disorders, they can provide children with appropriate, well-planned activities to avoid or remediate these difficulties.

EXPRESSIVE AND RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE DISORDERS

As with any skill, one can observe strengths and weaknesses in the use of language. While the major thrust of this book is on building strengths, much can be learned about the importance of language forms by examination of what happens when children's skills are noticeably weak.

Children with receptive verbal language deficits have difficulty understanding the information they receive. People with dyslexia, a receptive verbal deficit, have trouble reading the words printed on a page, even though they have average or above-average intelligence. Because they don't receive information accurately, dyslexics mix up letters and words. For example, they may reverse the letter 'd' to read 'b,' so that the word "dog" could be read as "bog."

Some people also suffer from expressive verbal language disorders. Children with problems of this type have trouble expressing or producing verbal information. For example, a child might read the word "may" correctly, but when he or she attempts to write or articulate it, the result is the word "yam."

Verbal language skills and their associated verbal language deficits have nonverbal parallels. In much the same way that dyslexics have difficulty with the written word (*dys* = difficulty, *lexic* = words), many children cannot understand or "read" the quieter messages of others. In our earlier book, *Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit In*, we coined the term *dyssemia*, meaning a difficulty (*dys*) in using nonverbal signs or signals

(*semes*). For example, a person with receptive facial dyssemia may misread a sad face as an angry one, and as a result may respond to downcast eyes with a frown or glare.

While children receive ample education in verbal language skills, little is typically done in school or at home to help them develop their nonverbal language abilities. Nevertheless, most children come to adolescence and adulthood with verbal skills adequate to meet the intellectual and vocational requirements that society places upon them. However, there are large numbers of children—all with the ability to learn and use nonverbal language—who do not develop those skills fully and therefore do not adequately understand how to establish and maintain effective interpersonal relationships. This book can help reduce that gap in children's educations.

Before moving on, we want to alert you to some characteristics often found in children with dyssemia. It is important to realize first that these dyssemic children generally want to participate with others in play or in family activities; they neither choose to be alone nor seek rejection. They want to get along with others and do what is expected of them, although that is not always reflected in their behavior.

Here are some indicators of dyssemia, derived from our research as well as from the work of Doris Johnson, Helmer Myklebust, and other investigators. The dyssemic child often:

- is described by parents and teachers as tactless and insensitive
- is described by other children as dumb, but is usually average or above average in intelligence
- is described by parents as being "different" from others since infancy
- is seen by parents and teachers as lacking in social maturity

- has difficulty perceiving danger
- has difficulty understanding rules and sequences of games
- has difficulty recognizing the contingency between his or her behavior and the consequences of that behavior
- feels some or all of the following feelings: sad, bewildered, lonely, confused, and anxious
- perseveres in action or activity even when it leads to punishment or rejection
- is inconsistent; will be accurate in some aspect of nonverbal communication one day but not the next.

Fortunately, children with dyssemic problems severe enough to evolve into the social-perceptual disability described above are rare. There are far more children who have the skills necessary to produce average to above-average social relationships. But there are other children who are so highly talented in the use of nonverbal language that they fit into a category we call *eusemic*.

Thus, just as there are children who have difficulties in using expressive and receptive nonverbal language, there are also youngsters who are especially good at communicating without words. Our research has indicated, in fact, that just as nonverbal deficits—dyssemias—are associated with social rejection, nonverbal strengths are associated with a high degree of social success. We have created the word *eusemia* to describe this unusually strong proficiency (from the Greek, *eu* = good). Thus, the eusemic child is the one so highly skilled in the use of expressive and receptive nonverbal language that he or she is able to move with ease socially and can establish and maintain friendships effectively. In contrast to the dyssemic child, eusemic children may be described as follows:

- tend to feel good about themselves, will describe themselves as happy and satisfied
- have high self-esteem
- are perceived by others as comfortable with themselves regardless of whether they have few or many close friends
- tend to be the ones chosen to be part of a group and often to be the leader of the group
- see a connection between what they do and what happens to them; do not often offer explanations or excuses having to do with luck, fate, or the impact of powerful others
- generally are not anxious or nervous
- use nonverbal expressions that are most often positive or happy; smile a great deal
- can stay focused on tasks
- seem to know what is appropriate to say to peers and adults in social situations
- will often offer to help beyond their own work
- are seen by teachers as competent and trustworthy.

There is no firm number of indicators for defining eusemia. However, the greater the number of indicators that apply to a child, the more likely it is that the child is successful in processing nonverbal social information.

Dyssemia and eusemia are both relatively rare. Ten percent of the population have nonverbal language deficits serious enough to cause social rejection. Similarly, only a small number of people could be described as eusemic. The vast majority of children and adults will fall somewhere between the two

extremes. This book addresses the potential of that majority of children who have developed *some* skills in nonverbal communication, but who have not yet achieved a sense of mastery in the language of relationships. It is essential for parents and teachers to understand, however, that the information and exercises in this book are intended to improve their children's nonverbal skills—the achievement of *all* the characteristics of eusemia listed above is an unrealistic goal.

The more children know about nonverbal language, the better they will do in relating to others; even moderate improvements, then, should be seen as valuable and worthy of pursuit. Further information and tips are contained in the following chapter so that you can conduct an informal evaluation of your child's current nonverbal language skills. Once you have evaluated your child's level of nonverbal communication abilities, you will be ready to help him or her to maximize those skills.