

# Practical Ways to Include Nonverbal / Non Speaking Learners

Simple, inclusive strategies that work in real classrooms

Created by **Inclusive Education For All**

Championing representation, diversity, and inclusion in education.

## Introduction: Understanding NonVerbal Communication

Children who are nonverbal or non speaking are communicating all the time—even if they do not use spoken words.

Communication can include:

- Eye gaze
- Gestures
- Facial expressions
- Body movement
- Use of objects
- AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)
- Behaviour



A child who does not speak is not silent. They are expressing needs, preferences, emotions, and ideas in ways that may look different from spoken language.

Inclusive practice begins with recognising and respecting all forms of communication—not trying to replace them, rush them, or ignore them.

**Key reminder:** Nonverbal does not mean non-communicative.



## 1. Everyday Classroom Adjustments (Low or No Cost)

Small changes can make a significant difference for nonverbal learners—without needing specialist equipment or additional funding.

### Use Visual Supports

- Visual timetables help reduce anxiety and build predictability
- Use symbols, photos, or simple drawings
- Display them at child-friendly height and refer to them consistently



### Simplify Spoken Language

- Reduce long explanations
- Use short, clear sentences
- Pause to allow processing time



## Create Predictable Routines

- Consistent routines support understanding and emotional regulation
- Prepare learners in advance for transitions using visuals or gestures

## Provide Clear Physical Structure

- Clearly defined work areas
- Visual cues for where to sit, line up, or store belongings
- Minimise sensory overload where possible



**Key reminder:** Inclusion doesn't require more time—it requires intentional choices.

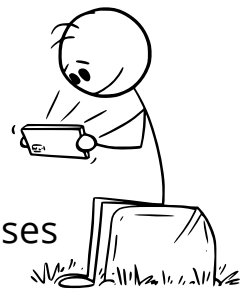


## 2. Supporting Participation Without Speech

Participation is not limited to speaking aloud.

Nonverbal learners can:

- Point to answers
- Choose between options
- Match symbols or images
- Use body language or movements
- Respond using AAC, buttons, or sign
- Participate through shared activities rather than verbal responses



### Practical Strategies

- Offer choice boards for answering questions
- Ask questions that allow pointing or selecting
- Accept responses in multiple formats
- Pair learners with supportive peers
- Celebrate contributions—not just correct verbal answers

**Key reminder:** Participation looks different for every learner—and that's okay.



## 3. Behaviour as Communication

Behaviour is often a form of communication—especially when spoken language is not accessible.

A child may be communicating:

- Discomfort
- Overwhelm

- Confusion
- Need for connection
- Frustration
- Sensory overload



Rather than asking, “How do we stop this behaviour?”  
Ask, “What is this child trying to tell us?”

### Supportive Responses

- Observe patterns and triggers
- Adjust the environment before addressing the behaviour
- Respond calmly and consistently
- Avoid punishment for unmet communication needs

**Key reminder:** When communication is supported, behaviour often changes.



## 4. Encouraging Independence and Confidence

Inclusive environments empower nonverbal learners to make choices and develop autonomy.

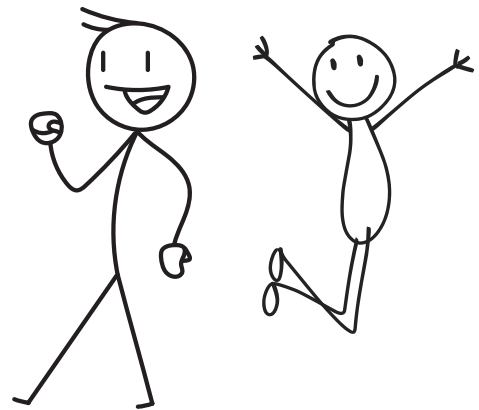
### Ways to Build Independence

- Offer choices regularly
- Allow extra processing time
- Encourage self-advocacy using visuals or AAC
- Avoid speaking for the child when possible
- Acknowledge all attempts to communicate

Confidence grows when children feel:

- Understood
- Valued

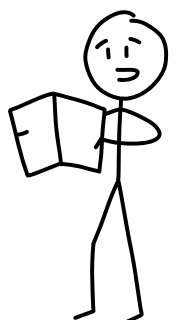
Safe to express themselves



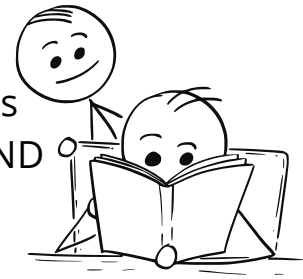
## 5. Inclusive Mindset Reminders

Inclusion is not about “fixing” the child. It is about removing barriers.  
Use these reminders in your everyday practice:

- Communication shouldn’t be forced—it should be supported
- Access comes before achievement



- Different does not mean less
- Every child deserves to be heard—even without words
- Inclusion benefits all learners, not only those with SEND



## Final Thought

You do not need to be an expert in autism or AAC to be inclusive.

- You need:
- Curiosity
- Flexibility
- Respect for difference
- Willingness to learn from the child

Inclusion happens in small, consistent moments—and those moments matter.



# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL

## About Inclusive Education For All

Inclusive Education For All is dedicated to creating inclusive, diverse, and representative educational resources that support all learners—especially those with additional needs.

Our work is informed by lived experience, advocacy, and a belief that every child deserves to be heard, loved and seen.

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