

Use this Tip Sheet as a guide and resource for supporting children in your program who do not use verbal language.

1.

Be a detective

Your first task is to find out what the child understands and **how they communicate**. You'll need to ask the parents/guardian, other program staff, and teachers, if appropriate. Does the child have an assistive device? Will they have it in your program?

2.

Establish "yes/no"

Ask the child, "Can you show me what yes/no looks like?" Working directly with the child, establish what **hand signals, movements, or gestures** they use to convey "yes" and "no." If they have any additional physical challenges, keep those in mind as you solidify their response. Ask them to demonstrate the movements to reinforce understanding.

If there isn't an established gesture for "yes/no," thumbs up or down is an obvious choice but you can use any movement: raise arm/hand, tilt head, use eyes to look up or down.

If a child shows you the same movement for both yes and no, they may not understand the question and may have more complex needs.

3.

Offer choices visually

In addition to non-verbal "yes" and "no," it may also be helpful to **offer choices by holding out objects or images of objects** for the youth to choose (choice board). For example, if the child can choose between music and art, hold out a paintbrush and a recorder for them to pick one.



Remember! Just because a child is non-verbal, that doesn't mean they don't understand you!

4.

Use child's own device or choice board

Add **images from your program** to the child's assistive device, if they have one. This will make it easier for the child and your program staff to ensure the child's needs are met as well as engage with their peers.

5.

Choice and Voice

The most important step you can take when supporting children who are non-verbal is ensuring they have a **choice** and they have a **voice**. Try not to let other program staff or other youth make decisions for them. This will take time and patience as staff will need to give choices over and over to find the right one. For example, "**Do you want to paint?**" "**Do you want to start with green?**" "**Do you want to start with red?**" "**Do you want to start with blue?**" and so on.

Important Note: These suggestions are for children who have a diagnosis and do not use verbal language as their form of communication. This is NOT a resource for children with a language delay.