

It's all about Perspective

Gathering Person Centered Information can sometimes be tricky. Great work is happening and we are all working hard to honor the person's perspective, but sometimes it can be difficult to understand what the person's perspective really is. Have you ever heard someone say, "She doesn't communicate" or "He's nonverbal so we don't know his perspective?" Everyone communicates and not using words to communicate is not the same as having no opinion. There are ways to discover the person's perspective through wordless messages. This article will touch on how to know what a person's perspective is when he/she doesn't use words or when words don't match actions.

How is the person's perspective understood if he/she doesn't use words to communicate or uses very few words to communicate?

When a person doesn't use words to communicate, look to his/her actions for clues about what he/she is thinking and feeling.

Much of our communication is unspoken. Humans are experts at giving and receiving non-verbal messages, though we may not always realize we are doing it well or constantly. We learn what others mean by continuously reading wordless clues. These clues help us to fully understand the depth of what someone is thinking and feeling. Body language, proximity (distance), physical appearance, eye contact, touch, and other unspoken elements known as paralanguage, including voice quality, rate, pitch, volume, and vocal tone tell us a lot about a person's meaning. We can tell if a person is nervous, happy, sad, angry, pleased, tired, hungry, or content just by noticing these unspoken clues. We more deeply understand the meaning of these messages as we get to know a person better and take notice of the connection between his/her actions and things going on in the environment.

For example, if a person sits very close to you with her body turned toward you, perhaps touching your hand, you might understand this to mean that she likes you or feels comfortable with you or comforted by your presence. If another person stays a distance from you, her body turned away from you, not giving you eye contact, you might understand this to mean that she is less comfortable with your presence. Once you get to know the person a bit more, you might learn that this body language means the person is having a bad day and she doesn't want to interact with anyone. Either way, these clues help you to understand a person without any words being exchanged.

How is the person’s perspective understood if he/she answers most or all questions with repeated words like “Yes,” “No,” or “I don’t know?”

Sometimes a person might say, “Yes,” when they really mean, “No.” When what a person is saying is in conflict with what they are doing — listen with your ears and eyes for what the person is doing; **focus on the action**. The non-spoken part of communication is very powerful. It can tell us much about the way we should interpret words. We can usually tell when a person is being sarcastic; he/she tells us this when the tone or pitch of his/her voice conflicts with the words he/she is using. We focus on the other clues such as vocal tone to accurately decipher the message. Use this same logic when trying to determine what a person really likes or doesn’t like.

If a person says, “Yes,” every time she is asked if she wants peas for dinner, but you know she makes a sour face or leaves the peas on the plate after eating the rest of her meal, you might surmise that she doesn’t like peas. She is saying one thing, but her actions are saying something else.

You might describe the scenario above in the following way on the Person Centered Information form:

Person’s Perspective:

Neva doesn’t seem to like eating peas. When Neva scrunches up her lips and nose or leaves food on her plate, her supporters thinks this means that Neva doesn’t like that particular food, or isn’t interested in eating it today. She has done this three times with peas, so we think this means she doesn’t like eating peas.

Additional Input:

Neva often says, “Yes,” when she might mean, “No.” Her supporters continue to offer Neva choices then watch her reaction to learn what she really does and doesn’t like.

Talk to others who know and care about the person to get more information. A lot can be learned from others who have already taken notice of the person’s reactions to many different things in life. As you get to know the person better, you might want to record what you have learned about the meaning of the person’s words, sounds, and actions so others can learn more.

If we are making our “best guess” at what the person’s perspective is, should this be recorded in the “person’s perspective” section of the Person Centered Information form or in “additional input?”

It is fine to describe your “best guess” about the person’s perspective in the “person’s perspective” section on the form. Be clear that what you are describing is your best guess.

If you have additional information to add that either supports or conflicts with the person’s perspective, use the **additional input** section of the form.

This is how you might describe your “best guess” on the Person Centered Information form when you’re basing it on your observations of the person’s actions:

Person’s Perspective:

Taki always smiles and laughs when swimming. He splashes and screams enthusiastically and grins widely when he is in the water. His supporters believe this means Taki loves swimming or loves being in the water.

Additional Input:

Taki needs to be supervised at all times around water. He will sometimes try to take off his life vest or run around the pool.

Perspectives are ever-changing, so keep looking and listening...

Seeking to understand the person’s perspective is a lifelong pursuit; perspectives change as life experiences change. Continue to look with your ears and eyes to the spoken and unspoken messages. As a human being, you are innately gifted for reading unspoken messages, so trust yourself. Ask a lot of questions of the person and others who know and care about the person. Take note when you think you have learned something new and share this information with others who work with the person. This way, over time, you can learn more about the person’s perspective and be better equipped with the information you need to support people in the most meaningful way.