

NONVERBAL SIGNALS USED BY THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

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***Abstract** – Careful observation of preschool children playing in a group can reveal a wide spectrum of nonverbal signals. Physical appearance, eye signals, movements and touching are only a small fraction of the preschool child's nonverbal repertoire which determine, to a certain degree, interpersonal communication and relationships within the group. This paper presents the results obtained by observing the activities of children in organised didactic games. Our goal was to determine how children express nonverbal signals with their eyes, movements or otherwise, while trying to accomplish certain tasks. Our starting point was based on the assumption that nonverbal signals are reliable indicators of pedagogical communication and important tools for enhancing the child's emotional development and cultivation. The identified nonverbal signals of the observed children were linked to their interest in the activities of the offered games and in their accomplishment. We further tried to find how the relationship between a child and her/his peers can be defined by the nonverbal signals s/he uses. The text also offers some suggestions to teachers and parents on how to notice, monitor and record the nonverbal signals of children at play.*

***Keywords:** nonverbal signals, eye signals, movement, didactic game, preschool child.*

Introductory remarks

“One hears only what one understands”
(Goethe)

The preschool age is a very important period in child development, since it is later reflected in individual accomplishments and progress. It is not by accident that many textbooks and teacher manuals for work with prescho-

ol children contain a statement about the importance of stimulating the overall development of children of an early age (before entering primary school), accompanied by the warning that later it is difficult, if at all possible, to compensate for what has been omitted in the preschool period (Kamenov, 1999). Therefore, it is essential to provide stimulation for the development of preschool children, both in the educational and upbringing segments. This implies the provision of favourable conditions for the development of physical and intellectual abilities, socio-emotional development, and the development of communicative and creative skills. If this standpoint is accepted, then an adequately organised educational process will plan the continuous monitoring of children's development by observing, assessing and recording certain changes in each child's behaviour and achievements.

The nonverbal signals and messages of preschool children are parts of their interpersonal communication. Regardless of the fact that these are not direct verbal responses to a certain situation, nonverbal signals express in the most direct way a child's emotional state and determine her/his status in the group. While playing with peers, a child usually communicates through words but, at the same time, supplements the communication with various nonverbal signals in order to send certain messages. Argyle identifies several essential functions of nonverbal communication (in Suzić, 2005): it helps the individual to *express emotions* (e.g. crying, laughing); frequently it is an *indicator of interpersonal attitudes* (frowning, a sudden touch); sometimes nonverbal signals are used to *support the flow of conversation* (nodding, hand gestures), or as a means of expressing *loyalty or affection to collocutors* (expressive gestures, smiles). In small groups, nonverbal signals can be indicators of the status of an individual within a group, e.g. in a situation where a person tries to conceal her/his leadership ambitions. By using nonverbal signals, a child tries to complete her/his verbal communication, or tries to confirm her/his own stance while expressing at the same time her/his emotional state at a given moment. Sometimes s/he tries to intensify her/his emotions, sometimes to conceal them. In any case, a child attempts to interpret her/his message without words. Nonverbal signals then become substitutes for words, or supplements of verbal communication. Hence, it is important that the adult child-carers (parents, preschool teachers) become well acquainted with different types of nonverbal symbols and their situational expression. Only then will they be able to recognise a child's needs at a particular moment, and be in a position to undertake suitable action to stimulate and direct her/his development. Only in this way can a teacher achieve effective pedagogic communication with children in a preschool educational institution. Another benefit is that a preschool teacher will inevitably enrich and develop her/his own nonverbal communication which leads to further professional development.

Functions of nonverbal communication

In contrast to verbal communication where language is used and which is suitable for transmitting logical and abstract ideas, nonverbal communication is aimed at *regulating the mechanisms of social interactions* (Smolčić, 2007). Besides, it functions as a means for the child to *express attitudes and emotional states*. The social interaction of a preschool child depends on her/his social skills and the level of her/his socio-emotional development. Only in social interactions does a child gradually develop the abilities to express her/his own attitudes or emotional states through the use of nonverbal signals. Generally speaking, human communication would not be complete if people were not able to interpret the nonverbal signals of others, nor would they be able to react adequately if they did not possess perceptual sensitivity for other people.

At the preschool age, this implies coping well with peer relations, the ability of the child to understand other children, and perceive and recognise their emotions. Coping with other children during play depends on skills connected to emotional intelligence, which belong to personal social competences. Personal competences relate to the development of self-awareness and self-control regarding the intentions and deeds of the child. Social competences depend on the development of social awareness and the abilities to manage social relationships (Bradberry and Greaves, 2006). Bearing in mind the specificities of the emotional maturation of preschool children, adult caretakers have an important task to work systematically on the cultivation of the child's emotions. This means that children should develop their abilities to understand, respect and appreciate the feelings of other people, to empathise with other people, develop readiness to control their own emotional reactions when in a group, and to form a sense of responsibility towards others. If properly developed, these abilities help the child to feel safe and to be self-confident, to be accepted in the peer group and to establish good social relationships with its members. Nonverbal peer communication contributes significantly to the development of the preschool child's self-identity, and this happens in two phases. The first phase relates to differentiation of the self from others, i.e. understanding of one's own existence as a single unit in a group. In the second phase, the child perceives herself/himself as an object, seeing herself/himself as others do.

Nonverbal signals in the learning process of the preschool child

Authors who study problems of child development and learning agree that play is a specific way of learning for the preschool child. Some compare child play with scientific research, which might be taken, in certain aspects, as grown-ups' play (Fagen, 1976; Lorayone, 2004). Their argument is that,

in their research activities, grown-ups experiment just like children at play: both identify and solve problems in specific and characteristic ways, and both transfer and systematise their knowledge and experience in a novel situation. In a peer group, children use different ways to express their needs, potentials, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with performance in the learning process. They frequently use nonverbal signals which should be perceived and recognised by their peers and adults. Especially expressive are eye signals and body movements. Closed eyes, frowning and stooping eyebrows, tapping feet, swaying and clicking fingers are some of the most common nonverbal signals which reveal the emotional state of a child.

Accepting the fact that play has an educational character, it becomes clear that, through play, children gradually transform the existing and create new behavioural patterns. In the process, the results of their nonverbal communication are important since they may hamper or stimulate the development of the child's independence, self-confidence, communicative competencies and creativity. While playing, a child researches the world around her/him, her/his own capabilities, achievements as well as the capabilities of other children in the group. This is how the child gains experience, learns and creates, and discovers new possibilities for acting in different situations (Kopas-Vukašinović, 2006). Although this form of learning is casual, preschool children acquire considerable amounts of knowledge and experience, develop skills for coping with certain situations, and acquire a certain system of nonverbal symbols before they enter primary school. Through play, the child develops special skills and behavioural patterns which are necessary for successful communication in a group. Furthermore, if enabled to play with different materials, the child will perform better in solving problems, which stimulates the development of physical, intellectual, social, communicative and other abilities. Stressing the importance of play for the development of the child's abilities, Wallon (1959) points out that each child's developmental phase is marked by an "explosion of activities" in which the child tests her/his abilities and functions and contributes to their multiplication and complexity.

Since play, development and education are complementary, nonverbal communication during play often determines the flow of the game, stimulates or ties the child in the process of learning, thus affecting his development and education. Nonverbal signals determine the relationship of the child with the peer group, as well as of the group to herself/himself. In certain situations, eye or body signals, the body posture or facial expression (lips puckered or contracted, a smile, an open mouth) can influence directly interaction within the group and affect children's learning. In this way, children develop their self-awareness, while simultaneously perceiving the image that other children are forming about them. Very soon, somewhere during the fourth year of life, the child begins to realise that the thoughts and feelings of other people differ

from her/his own. S/he understands that another person does not necessarily see something in the way s/he sees it and that someone who has not witnessed an event cannot know what has happened (Einon, 2003). In this period, a child engages gladly in role plays. It “pretends” to be someone else, exchanges roles with other children and uses different objects for different roles. This is one of the ways in which children practise and develop their skills of perceiving events from different angles.

Types of nonverbal signs used by preschool children at play

Literature offers different typologies of nonverbal signals. One was elaborated by J. K. Brillhart et al. who defined eight types of nonverbal signals (in Suzić, 2005). T. Mandić (2003) studied different aspects of nonverbal communication and offered ten types of nonverbal signals, stressing the possibility of great variation in combinations of their usage. We present here those nonverbal signals that are most frequently used by children at play. Primarily, this relates to those signals that children send both to the adult person who is confronting them with a task and to their playmates.

Using the above typologies as a basis, we discovered that children of the oldest preschool age use different nonverbal signals. Depending on their interests for the offered activities and in completing them, the observed children communicated with the adults and peers in different ways. The games we offered to the children who were to start the first grade of primary school the subsequent year were thematically connected to the field *Getting to Know your Surroundings*. These contents are part of the preschool preparatory programme. The selected games included the following individual activities: discussion on a theme (visually presented), table games with printed material, logical assembling of elements, thematically connecting and assembling pictures (developing stories) and word games (words beginning with a certain sound/letter). While observing the children, we noticed that, in similar situations, children communicated nonverbally in different ways, e.g., when they were not sure whether their response was correct, or when feeling happy to have been able to connect pictures. Further, we noticed that the same child sends identical nonverbal signals to the teacher or peers in similar situations. Of course, the mentioned examples do not represent the results of any research, but are only the author’s humble experiential contribution to theoretical considerations of the nonverbal communication of preschool children. These data helped us in the selection of the most frequently used nonverbal signals in relation to the mentioned typologies.

In order to specify the selected types in relation to the established characteristics of the preschool age, we present the following table with the observed nonverbal signals:

Table 1. *Most common nonverbal signals of preschool children at play.*

Nonverbal signal type	Ways of expressing signals	Characteristics of preschool age
Physical posture	‘‘first-glance’’ impression, physical appearance, clothing, body posture, personal hygiene	The child has not yet developed a feeling of consideration towards persons with whom s/he has been in communication from the earliest days of life.
Space and taking a seat	taking a central position in the room, sitting in a corner, taking a seat face to face someone, taking a seat next to someone	Physical contacts in communication are common.
Eye signals	swift eye movements, stiff glance, hiding one’s glance, eyes closed, sideways glance, eyes wide open	Children feel better when sitting in a circle since it enables better eye communication.
Facial expression	position of lips, general expression of the face	changes frequently due to intense and unstable emotions
Movements, gestures	moderate or swift movements, feet tapping, finger drumming, playing with fingers	moving around the classroom, going from one corner to another
Vocal expressions	voice intensity, tone, stressing, speech speed, pauses in speech ...	imitating a model
Timing (temporal expressions)	joining in activity with delay, abandoning game before its end, forcing one’s own rules and emphasising one’s own attitudes	susceptibility to environmental influences
Touch (proxemic expressions)	hugging, shoulder tapping, holding hands	Children like games with a lot of touching since their senses are the dominant intermediary between them and their surroundings.
Sketching, drawing and painting	intensive sketching, nervous sketching, patient drawing or painting, emphasising details, repetition of details ...	a drawing (painting) as a basic indicator of the development of the preschool child

An individual’s judgement about a person based on that person’s *physical appearance* may be, but is not necessarily, correct. The way a person dresses, the fashion s/he prefers, a straight or bent-over body posture are all non-verbal signals that are very powerful in determining the attitude of a group towards an individual. The place where a person stands or sits also influences the communication of the members of a group with her/him. Sometimes they will perceive a person as a dominating one, someone who wishes to be the centre of attention or shows a need to be included in the group’s activity.

Alternatively, a person may wish to keep a distance and simply observe the activity. However, it frequently happens that an individual will want first to evaluate the situation in the group and then decide whether and how to join in. Brillhardt's research confirmed the thesis that individuals of the same age or social status have a need for physical closeness, in contrast to persons who differ by these criteria (Mandić, 2003).

Eye signals are a very reliable indicator of the emotional state of a person. They are very important in pedagogical communication with children. It is therefore important that the teacher (parent) observes and recognises them. It is commonly known that *facial expressions* do not necessarily reveal a person's emotional state, but mainly confirm the owner's superiority, signalling agreement or disagreement with another's argument, or revealing the person's fear, pensiveness, surprise, confusion or evasion. Yet, it is possible to monitor the emotional or cognitive state of a person, her/his attitudes toward certain issues or interestedness in an activity by observing the expression of her/his face and the position of the lips. Both eye signals and facial expression directly influence the interaction of the individual in a group.

Another of the dominant nonverbal tools in group communication is *movement*, and it has an important role in the pedagogical interaction of the child both with peers and adults. Movements reveal the state a child is in and her/his position in the group. It is sometimes possible to detect whether a child is nervous or calm by the way s/he moves either parts of or the whole body. At the same time, movements indicate the social status of a child, whether peers accept her/him, even electing that child for their leader or, perhaps, rejecting her/him. Therefore, movement, as a nonverbal signal, is essential for monitoring and supporting the development of the preschool child, since preschool children learn by imitating role models, which implies imitation, identification and role learning. Children often imitate the movements of adults and play different roles to present the situations they recognise in the world of adults.

Besides using movements while addressing us in speech, the child also uses certain specific characteristic tones of speech. This is often referred to as *para-speech*, a specific form of nonverbal communication and an excellent indicator of the child's mood and the level of the development of her/his self-confidence. During the educational process, the speech of the adult must be clear, pure and loud. Bearing in mind that children learn by role modelling, this is the only way to stimulate the development of pure and clear speech in children.

Since the earliest age, when they become interested in peers, it is important to provide conditions for children to get used to obeying such rules of behaviour that respect each member in a group. This means that each child should be given an equal chance to express her/his potentials in her/his own unique way. Related to this are *temporal signals* as part of nonverbal commu-

nication. If a child engages only briefly in a game, or insists on playing with certain elements (a toy) all the time, we can detect her/his different needs and expectations: she/he wants to prove his/her superiority, group status, or wishes to make her/his own game rules, etc.

Touching others is also an important nonverbal signal in pedagogical communication – a form of tactile interpersonal communication. By touching, a child expresses her/his needs related to other children in the group. Touching can be intentional, unintentional, friendly or not.

When discussing the different types of nonverbal communication of preschool children, one should not neglect *sketching*, *drawing* and *painting*. Each child has a need to sketch and draw. It is a way the child expresses not only creative potentials but also her/his emotional states. If we observe and analyse a child's behaviour while drawing, we can get "first-hand information" about the processes that are going on in her/him, while the child is often unaware of them or, perhaps, does not want to express them. If the focus of our attention is on the child and on processes, then the aesthetic value of the drawing is not a priority.

Since the possibilities of nonverbal communication are many, and given that various types are used when children play, the role and even duty of the adult are to *monitor children's behaviour and recognise the nonverbal signals*, all aimed at directing, helping, and supporting each child in the given activities. Monitoring nonverbal signals is a very subtle task for the teacher and requires permanent in-service training. Additionally, teachers and parents send nonverbal signals to children, too. Both, then, should take account of the child's age and the developmental capabilities of each child in a group if children are to understand them. Further, the preschool teacher is responsible for selecting and suggesting activities and games that respect the developmental limitations of children, for providing appropriate conditions for the selected activities, and for supporting and enhancing the development of each child.

Conclusion

Preschool children use nonverbal signals in communication in specific ways. These depend on the age and individual characteristics of the child and the characteristics of child play which is an essential activity for children of this age. Apart from speech, in social interactions with peers, through various types of games, the child uses movements, touches, eye signals and other types of nonverbal communication. In any case, these signals must be understandable to other children, which implies the learning and exchange of nonverbal signals in a group. The way a child communicates with other children in a group, and the types of nonverbal signal s/he uses, determines her/his status in the group, which influences directly the development of her/his potenti-

als. From the point of view of the preschool teacher, it is especially important to define the teacher's role in preparing children for nonverbal communication. The preschool teacher is a role model of high priority for children in the sphere of nonverbal signals and communication. The teacher's reactions will induce children's reactions in certain situations, especially when they wish to express their attitudes or feelings. To sum up, further research of nonverbal communication between preschool teachers and children would be most welcome and, most certainly, would mean a step forward in the development of preschool education.

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NEVERBALNI SIGNALI PREDŠKOLSKOG DJETETA

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Sažetak – Pažljivim promatranjem predškolskog djeteta koje se igra u grupi, možemo zapaziti i evidentirati širok spektar njegovih neverbalnih signala. Fizička pojava, signali očiju, pokret i dodir, predstavljaju samo dio tipova ovih signala, koji u izvjesnom smislu određuju interpersonalnu komunikaciju i odnose u grupi. U radu su predstavljeni rezultati do kojih je autorica došla praćenjem aktivnosti djece u organiziranim igrama. Cilj je bio utvrditi kako djeca očima, pokretom ili na drugačiji način, pokazuju svoje neverbalne signale pri rješavanju određenih zadataka. Autorica je pošla od konstatacije da su takvi signali pouzdani pokazatelji efikasnosti pedagoške komunikacije i značajni za kultiviranje dječjih emocija. Evidentirani neverbalni signali djece dovedeni su u vezu s njihovim interesima za aktivnosti, kao i postignućima u igri. Također smo pokušali utvrditi na koji način su odnosi djeteta prema vršnjacima u grupi određeni njegovim pokazanim signalima. Tekst donosi i preporuke odgajateljima i roditeljima za odgovarajuće zapažanje, praćenje i bilježenje neverbalnih signala djece u igri.

Cljučne riječi: neverbalni signali, signali očiju, pokret, didaktička igra, predškolsko dijete.