

Becoming a Verbal Ensemble: Coping with Mumbling, Questions, Chatter and More

By Arleta James, PCC

Communicating with the adoptee with a history of trauma can resemble trying to have a conversation with someone speaking a different language! You simply want to obtain basic information or engage in a discussion. Yet, your son or daughter's mumbling, incessant chatter, persistent nonsense questions and so on, lack translation! You walk away angry or hurt! "Why can't he just 'talk' with me? "Why can't she just answer a question?" "I really wish she would be quiet for two minutes!" Or, "He hardly ever talks with us— unless he needs something."



Here are some thoughts on helping your adoptee learn to speak in harmony with your family!

Increase “Talking with the Child”

Yesterday, I asked 9-year-old Emma about her theft of her brother's iPod. Immediately, she turned toward Mom and just stared. Instantly, Mom began answering my question!

Over time, it is easy to fall into a pattern of “talking *for* the child”, or anticipating the needs of the child. Also yesterday, I was speaking with a Mom and Dad. Their 12-year-old son entered my office and firmly stated, “Mom.” Mom started pulling snacks from her purse, and she said, “He needs something to eat.” Mom offered several treat options. Eventually, this youngster grabbed a candy bar and left the room! Mom, used to this level of disrespect, resumed her conversation with me as if we had never been interrupted!

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As a first measure toward melodic communication, I encourage parents to step back and monitor how much “talking for the child” they do during the course of the day. Then, stop! Our goal is to “talk *with* these children.” Blank stares, one word demands, pointing, etc., need some tuning!

An adult adoptee I know retells this story frequently. When first placed with his family, in his adolescence, his Dad would say, “I’m going to the grocery store. What would you like me to pick up for your lunches?” The then teen would state, “Whatever” or “Something.” One Monday, upon opening his lunch, he found a green pepper with a note attached. “I picked ‘something’ up for your lunch! I love you, Dad.” Quickly, he will say, “I learned to talk with my dad!”

On a Fun Note...



In the day-to-day grind of one behavioral issue after another, we do have choices! We can get mad, or we can begin having more fun with the behavior! Yes, I said, fun! Likely, most readers chuckled about the green pepper incident relayed above! Really, picturing a teen holding a green pepper in the cafeteria is quite a hoot!

Daily, I mumble along with kids. Or, I act like I misunderstood—I am old, and I can’t always hear well! I might be on a tangent until my child client shouts, “I didn’t say anything about elephants. I said Mom got mad because I didn’t put my clean pants away.”

Pointing is likely to result in being handed toilet paper instead of pop. Staring might mean that you want to hold the laundry basket, rather than it is time to drive to soccer practice. Until there are pleasant sounding words —“Mom, may I please have a snack?” “Mom could you please take me to the library?”— it is unlikely that a request is filled correctly.

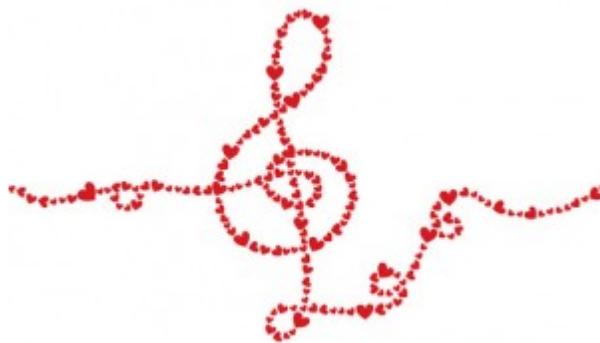
The nonsense questions are met with similar lyrics. After arriving at Wal-Mart, the child who asks, “Are we at Wal-Mart?” can receive the reply, “Yes, there are giraffes in the parking lot.”

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One clever Mom offered her son 10 index cards. She stated, "You get to ask 10 questions today that you already know the answer too." Rapidly, he blew through the first nine questions. Mom removed one card per question. Hours then passed. Yet, there wasn't another query — until dad arrived home from work. Dad was greeted with, "Are you home from work?" Voluntarily this youngster handed the tenth card over to mom as he said, "I didn't want dad to miss out!" From this point on, the totally ridiculous inquiries drastically reduced! This technique has been replicated by many families with great success!

The key is to take an action and then move on. There is no explaining the "green pepper." There is no lecturing for the 1000th time that "You need to ask." There is also no, "See! How do you like it?" We are "joining in" with the behavior to have fun! The family who generates concordant affect—smiles, giggles, laughter—is the family with whom the adopted son or daughter will begin to speak!

On a Serious Scale...



Certainly, the child's traumatic past provides the context for these communication behaviors to develop. As some examples,

- Lying in an orphanage crib—day after day—the infant learns that adults don't respond. There is no point crying. Thus, at later ages, this translates into, there is no point asking or talking to adults.
- The foundation for conversation is laid within the brain when the infant is only days old! Think about how much we talk to babies! It is constant—except for those infants experiencing neglect and deprivation. These youngest children rarely receive coos from adults who marvel them! Their brains are left without the pathways needed to reciprocally respond when spoken too.
- The infant that holds his own bottle perceives that he kept himself alive. The young child survivor of harsh beatings or sexual assaults also thinks that he or she cared for himself or herself. Thus, their thought pattern is one of self-reliance. Unfortunately, this type of thinking doesn't always fade once placed in a healthy family system. These kids take what they want. They make demands instead of requests. They interact only as they need to.
- Other children emerge from abuse, neglect and abandonment with fragmented development. There is a discord between their chronological age and their social-emotional age. There are "pieces" of your son or daughter that are "younger." Thus, their nonsense questions are actually reflective of the development of a pre-school age child. Those who have parented a "normal" 3-5-year-old remember those years of endless questions! Why is the grass green? Why do cows give milk? Why do dogs bark? Non-verbal communication—I call this "face talk" in therapy—is the

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language of infants. Daily, I encourage kids to stop using their eyes to communicate. I say, "use your words." Until development is moved along, the child will continue the behavior. From time to time, step back and observe your adopted son or daughter. Does he get along better with young children? Does she gravitate to toys you think are "immature" for her age? Does she still need prompts to clean her room, brush her teeth, etc.? Then, your child has cognitive, social and emotional delays. In essence, you have a "little" son or daughter.

It is nice when parents and professionals can keep this understanding of the impact of trauma in mind. It lends to more even emotional keel in interactions with these kids. Calm exchanges help the child heal from the early hurts.

Yet, let's keep in mind that respectful, reciprocal interactions are an absolutely essential skill! Someday, sons and daughters are going to need to ask for job applications. Someday they are going to have wives, children, bosses, co-workers, etc.

Today, it can't be more important to us that they arrive at school with their backpack or make it to basketball practice. I'm not worried about letting the team down. I'm concerned that your child develops the pleasant sounding words needed to become a productive, happy adult. So, while I want you to have some fun with this behavior, I also want you to hold firm. Demands, stares, "What?", "Huh?" and so on, require that parents take action. Cars don't need to move. Snacks shouldn't appear. Etc.

Respect is instrumental in attaining harmonious communication. This makes sense when we think about our own adult interactions. As adults, we want to talk with those we respect, and whom we believe respects and appreciates us. When you set a tone that you are to be treated kindly, all of your children will view you with new eyes and ears! You and your family will become a verbal ensemble!