

Ep #72: Nonverbal communication and the messages we're sending

In this episode, we will be talking about body language and proxemics. This is episode 72. Let's begin.

Smarter Parenting welcomes you to our podcast series, The Parenting Coach for ADHD. Here to heal and elevate lives is your Parenting Coach, Siopé Kinikini.

Hello, everyone. How is everyone doing? I hope you're doing fantastic. I'm doing great myself. Today, we're going to be talking about something that is super important in your communication with your children. Now, there's a nuanced way about approaching communication, which deals with your body language; and also with the study of proxemics, which is the study of space between you and your child. So, for example, if you and your child are dealing with a difficult topic, what is your body language saying? [And how is it communicated to your child, whether or not they will be defensive towards your approach or not?](#)

So, let's begin by talking first off about body language. Now, when I was preparing my comments and my thoughts about this topic because it's come up with a lot of parents in teaching the skills to their children, the first thing that came to my mind was Disney's The Little Mermaid. Wonderful film. Animated film. And in the film, there is a sea witch. Her name is Ursula. Now, I'm sure most of you have seen this movie because it's fantastic. It's actually one of my favorite Disney movies ever. But in the movie, Ursula, the witch, is trying to tell Ariel, the little mermaid, that she is going to take her voice away from her. And that she doesn't really need her voice in order to communicate with this handsome prince that Ariel has fallen in love with. And that she will find other ways to communicate with him.

And in her song, because she's singing about this, she actually says, "And don't underestimate the power of body language." And, for me, it makes me laugh because in the animated movie, she's actually dancing around while she's singing this. And there is something to be said about that. There is something to be said about how we communicate through our bodies, how we communicate non-verbally. And so, that was the first thing that came to my mind. And it actually started me on a path on my own journey about my experience in dealing with nonverbal communications and body language. How our bodies communicate certain things.

Now, when I was younger, I actually worked as a sign language interpreter. And one of the things that you're taught in sign language is that your facial expressions are super, super important because you can convey a lot with just the way your face does things. So, when I started off in training, you're taught about all these different ways that you're using your hands to communicate things, but you're also taught in how to use your body and shifting your body

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around while you're interpreting. So, for example, when you are having a conversation between two people, you actually shift your body slightly so the deaf person, who is watching you interpret, knows which character is communicating. Who is actually talking, simply by shifting your shoulders either to the left or to the right, and you keep it consistent during the communication. And that's one way that body language helps to define certain things, and how we interpret things based on body language.

Now, I want to give a fun example or fun tip that you should try, and that is actually to watch a video but to turn off the sound. So, we depend a lot on our ears to get the message of things that are being communicated. However, if we pay attention to the body language that's happening, it's actually really fascinating because you start to see a truth in the body language that is not apparent in the verbal communication. Let me give you an example of this because I had just seen this last week. I was scrolling through Facebook, as I usually do, and one of my friends posted a birthday celebration for his son. They were in a restaurant and they had brought out a dessert for the son, who was wearing the sombrero. And by him, were three waitresses who were singing Happy Birthday to him.

Now, when you actually watch this video with the sound, it sounds fantastic because they're clapping along and they're singing, "Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday." And so, the Happy Birthday song is going on. There's clapping. The lights are bright. The kid is smiling. And everyone is cheering. And what I did was I turned the sound off. I turned the sound off, and I just observed the body language that was going on during this exchange of Happy Birthday. And what I found was super fascinating.

Of the three waitresses who were standing behind the young man and singing Happy Birthday, the waitress who was standing in the middle, she was clapping but she wasn't really clapping. It was more of an air clap. And you could see her looking to the left and looking to the right. Her shoulders were drawn in. She actually took a step back during this whole exchange. And she's looking around and she's looking down at the kid who's receiving the Happy Birthday. She doesn't smile at all. And actually, before the song ends, before everyone starts cheering really loudly, she actually begins to walk out of the frame. Like, "I've had enough. I am out of here." It was super hilarious to watch as a video without any sound because what I was able to pick up from her body language was, "I really don't care. I'm just ready to get off my shift, and this is annoying." The other two waitresses were a little more into it, but you could also tell in their body language that they were communicating something very different than what they were communicating verbally. And so, watching the video in the two different ways actually brought a different perspective.

We are always communicating with our bodies. Our bodies are telling a story or sending out messages, whether we like it or not. If our arms are folded. If our eyes are cast down. If our head is tilted in a certain direction. We're always communicating something. We're always communicating something. And so, having parents be aware of how their body is communicating with their child, especially an ADHD child who is super tense, that can actually

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help escalate or deescalate a situation. So, parents really need to be aware of their body language. "What am I communicating?"

I have a friend who's a photographer, and this last weekend my friend was taking pictures with my daughter who went to a school dance. And it was interesting to watch him actually prepare pictures because he would do certain angles with their bodies and he would say, "Okay, stand this way. I want you to put one leg behind you and one leg in front of you. I need you to tilt your head up and tilted off to the side." So, he was giving directions in order to stage body language for pictures.

And in talking to him, he said, "You know, you are communicating, through a picture, a lot of different things. And depending on what you want to communicate is how you want to place the angle. The angle of the camera and the angle of the subject." And so, he took some pictures that were super low on the ground and then some that were eye level and then some that were above. And they all told very different stories. And in our discussion, because I was preparing to talk about body language during this podcast, we talked about the importance of how we frame our bodies. What angles are important and what are not? What are we conveying in our messages?

This idea of body language and the importance of body language is everywhere. It is absolutely everywhere. And yet, we rely heavily upon what we hear in order to determine what meaning is around us. So, I'm asking parents to take a step back and observe body language. Take some time. And I want you to do this. I want you to take some time and watch some videos without any sound. I'm not going to ask you to watch movies; they're very staged in the presentation of where bodies are and how they're framed and everything else. I want you to watch just basic videos that you would run across of a friend filming an event. And pay attention to the people in there and evaluate the body language that they're sending at that moment.

For the example of my friend and his son during the Happy Birthday in the restaurant, I thought it was actually very telling the two different feelings I received. The first: I was listening to the sound, and I actually was caught up in the excitement of the moment. But when I turned the sound off and I noticed the body language, I started to realize they were not that interested in this kid's birthday. They were at work and they just wanted it to get over. So, super hilarious, but I advise parents actually do this. So, watch a video and just pay attention to the body language. Pay attention to the body language that's happening with the people in there, and you will get a sense for what is really going on, how people are really feeling.

Now, how does that relate in dealing with a child who struggles with ADHD? What, I feel, is fascinating is that parents tend to approach situations very confrontationally. And so, the idea that you are going to take some time to read your child's body language and evaluate your own body language, sometimes it doesn't come into the mix. [But you need to do that because again, what you're communicating with your body can actually escalate the situation, and it can actually deescalate if you approach it in a more thoughtful way.](#)

Now, this topic is super fascinating for me because I think it actually is everywhere. When I was talking to my photographer friend about body language, we started talking about movie posters. And he pointed out to me that movie posters are, in a way, body language but on steroids. Right? And he gave me the example of movies where there are wars or there's confrontation. If you look at the movie poster for Captain America: Civil War, you have an image of Captain America facing Iron Man. They're both just looking straight at each other, and it's just both their faces looking directly at each other. And so, he said, "It's very reminiscent of all posters that deal with conflict. And with war, you usually have the two sides staring directly into each other's eyes like a fight. So, think of any movie poster where there is a war or some type of argument going on between the two. You usually have it split down the middle with the two sides facing each other because it causes this tension in the body language that they're exhibiting and the way that we interpret it." There are other movie posters that do the exact same thing.

So, the weigh-ins for professional fighting actually is done the same way and the way that they market it. If you notice, they have the two fighters there, and they'll have a fighter on one side and a fighter on the other side actually weigh in and come and meet right in the middle, and they're face to face, just staring each other down. It's this idea of creating this tension in our observation of the body language.

And so, body language is absolutely essential in the way that we communicate with each other, although we do give preference to what we hear. And so, your ability as a parent to address a situation with your child using effective body language is going to be essential to your success. You need to be aware of your body language and also the body language of your child.

Now, some of the negative ways that children display discomfort in their body language can be exhibited in their arms. Are their arms folded? Are they open? How tense is their face? Are they making eye contact with you? Where are their shoulders? Where are their feet situated? What angle?

This is an interesting experiment that you can also try in your communication. When you're standing in a circle with people, observe where the feet are pointed, if they're all pointed into the center, then everybody's involved. If you notice the feet start to shift, then that is a cue in body language that somebody wants to leave the conversation, or they don't feel like they need to be a part of it. And so, you can adjust that.

I had mentioned this to my daughter for her to try it out at school and she was laughing because it was absolutely true. What she noticed was how people are placing their feet when they're talking in a circle determines how big the circle is going to get and who's really engaged. And when somebody starts to shift their feet outside of the circle, they wanted to leave. Or they were planning to leave. Or they were getting ready to go. Also, whether or not they allow somebody else to come into the circle can be determined by the body language as well. So, really, really fascinating stuff about body language. And your job as a parent is to recognize the body

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language that your child is exhibiting, and your own body language, and how you can approach your child in a positive way.

Now, we've been talking about body language, but I also want to talk about proxemics. Which is the study of space between you and another person. Proxemics deals with "Okay, what is intimate? What is not intimate?" Here in the U.S., we have some very distinct ideas of space. We have bubbles around us. And our bubbles are actually very different than, say, a different culture. I spent time in Argentina where, in the place that I was living, people actually tended to be a lot more closer than I was used to here in the United States. While traveling throughout Europe, I noticed space was very, very different between me and other people. And this can be cultural, but I'm specifically talking about here in the United States.

There are four specific areas in the study of proxemics on where we develop our comfort level. Now, an intimate relationship with somebody is usually zero to 2 feet. Anything in there is considered intimate. For personal space, it's usually 2 to 4 feet. For social distance, it's 4 to 12 feet. And for the public, it's 12 feet and beyond that. So, if you're having an intimate communication with somebody, it's zero to 2 feet. Anywhere between there, you're having this dialogue or communication with them which is super close. The study of proxemics gives us these indications of what is a safe space in order to create these relationships with other people. So, something intimate, again, is zero to 2 feet. Something more personal would be 2 to 14 feet. A social distance that is safe, that most people in the United States feel safe at is 4 to 12 feet. And then something that's public is 12 feet away.

I want you to consider where the distance is between you and your child. What is a safe distance that you feel? And what is a safe distance that they feel? You're going to be able to tell this by their approach into your space. How close do they get to you when they want to talk about something difficult? Is it intimate? Is it personal? Is it at a social distance? The more difficult it is, and depending on your relationship, a child will want to disengage and be a little more distant, while you may want to be more intimate. So, paying attention to proxemics and your body language, that's going to give you the best nonverbal approach in how you're going to interact with your child.

Now, children with ADHD tend to be all over the place, but they have very distinct levels of comfort with how close people are to them. And that all depends on relationship. The more you can work in an intimate space, the more powerful you are going to be in creating a strong relationship with your child.

So, this is what I'm going to be asking of you as parents in dealing with difficult or negative behaviors, and also with regular behaviors: I need you to pay attention to your body language. What are you communicating to your child? What are the messages you are sending to your child? Whether you're having your arms folded. Your hands to the side. Your eye contact. Whether or not you're on level with them? Are you looking down at them, because looking down at them and having them look up to you. Actually there's a power play in that? Are you eye level

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with each other and communicating in that way? When you add that, in addition to maintaining a calm voice tone and teaching a skill, you're going to find you're going to be far more effective in teaching your children skills that will last a lifetime. [And actually creating bonds and a relationship that will be strengthened over time.](#)

Let me give you an example of how I would approach this and how you may approach this. Let's say that your child has a dirty room, and you've been trying to get your child to clean the room forever. So, you're going to address this issue with your child. How are you going to address it? And what body language do you want to give to your child, all the while paying attention to the body language of your child? So, you come into the room, you notice that there is a mess. This is an intimate thing. Are you going to go into their face, into their space, and confront them face to face, like the movie posters where there's confrontation going on? Or, are you going to approach it in a different way?

Now, remember, these are all about choices that you can make as a parent. You can choose how you're going to approach this. You can choose. You could do it one way or you can do it another. You can stand at the door and talk to your child. Again, is it still face to face? Yeah. Is that confrontational? Are you looking down at them? Are they looking up at you? Is that the best way to communicate about this difficult topic?

Now, you need to pay attention to these things. One of the most effective ways to deal with a difficult topic is actually to be aware of your body language and be aware of proxemics. The space that you are between each other. And for a dirty room that you need to address, it's better to push problem things outside of your relationship. So, instead of being face to face, you want to push the problem in front. It's better to have you standing at the door with your child standing next to you, looking at the room and talking about the room and saying, "Okay, well, this room is messy." And so, the problem is pushed outside. Now, again, that's paying attention to body language and to proxemics.

Now, you're having this intimate closeness because you guys are next to each other. You're standing side-by-side, and you're looking at a problem outside. Which is within the personal and social distance. The room is away. [And all of this helps to communicate this idea of "I'm building a relationship with my child. And even though we're talking about negative things, we are doing it in a way that will still strengthen our relationship."](#) And that the child knows the problem is not between you and the child; the problem is your child being able to follow through with cleaning their room. And it exists out here. When you start to approach problems this way, you actually help teach your child to trust you and to come to you when there are difficult things.

Now, what if it's something that you need to discuss that you cannot stand side-by-side and look at? Well, there are other ways to do that, and you can actually address that by writing the situation on a piece of paper. And putting the piece of paper in front of you and having your child sit next to you and paying attention to the problem in front of you as something that you are going to solve together. You're going to work on together. [And every time you praise your child.](#)

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[then you look face-to-face and say, "Good job."](#) And so, you're making those connections. Anything positive: face-to-face. Any problems, you want to push out in front of you.

So, those are the ways that I would approach that, and keep proxemics and also your body language in check. You want to be open. You want to make eye contact. You want to be eye level. You want to push problems out to the front. You want to be intimate when you're dealing with difficult topics, but you want to be intimate in a way that is supportive of helping your child adapt to what needs to be done, rather than confrontational, where you're accusing and pointing fingers. Now, again, pointing fingers is a body language thing, and you do not want to be doing that. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, at your child's face or in your child's chest. You don't want to be doing that because that actually creates a wall and tension which breaks down communication and breaks down relationships.

So, those are the things that parents need to be aware of. When you're teaching skills, over at the Smarter Parenting website, you will find that we give you some very specific instructions on how to teach the skills. But this is something that's a little more nuanced. [And, in fact, this is the type of stuff that we cover when you call in for coaching.](#) When you call in for coaching, I give you some very nuanced ways that you can work through the skills in helping your child. Now, all the steps to the skills stay the same. [The skill is the skill, and everything is in there that you need to do.](#) However, I may make some recommendations on how you approach it and how you do things. Your approach to difficult topics with your child makes a difference. It makes a huge difference. And so, if you find yourself as one of those parents that is constantly arguing and fighting and yelling back and forth, you can actually help alleviate a lot of that stress simply by being aware of your body language. Your child's body language. Pushing problems out to the front. And being able to discuss things more calmly. And adjusting the way that you approach the situation.

Now, if you think about politicians, they're really great at this because they can address a lot of topics, or not address topics, by the way that they approach them. You can actually address anything with your child. You can. You can talk about very difficult topics if the approach is appropriate. [If the approach helps to reinforce the relationship.](#) I cannot tell you how many times I have talked about difficult, difficult topics with my child. Having to deal with all of the issues that I feel like are important in our world today. We can talk about sexuality. We can talk about war, we can talk about rights. We can talk about anything. And that's because we've created this ability, and my ability, to recognize body language and discomfort, and then adjust and push problems out in front of us and communicate that way while keeping an intimate relationship with proxemics. [I'm close to her when there are difficult things that we need to discuss, so she feels like I'm an ally and I'm a friend and I'm there to support and to help.](#)

Again, these are just fantastic topics and I'd love to get more in-depth with you. And that's what you get when you call in for a [coaching session](#). So, call in and set up a coaching session and let's talk about what's happening, and ways that you can interact with your child in a more positive way. Sign up over at the Smarter Parenting website. Tell me what's going on in your

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family, and I'll give you some of these nuanced approaches. And this, body language, proxemics, super important in your approach to handling difficult situations with your children, especially children with ADHD.

That's it for me, and I'll see you again next time. All right, bye.

RESOURCES MENTIONED IN THIS PODCAST

[Behavior skills of the Teaching-Family Model](#)

[Ep #46: Understanding the ABC's of Behavior](#)

[Ep #47: Mastering Observe and Describe](#)

[Ep #48: What it takes to change behavior](#)

[Ep #49: Compound effect of Effective Communication](#)

[Ep #50: Changing behavior through praise](#)

[Ep #51: Finding Success with Preventive Teaching](#)

[Ep #52: How to fix negative behaviors](#)

[Ep #53: The importance of Following Instructions](#)

[Ep #54: Teaching kids to make better decisions](#)

[Ep #55: Reducing bad behavior with Effective Negative Consequences](#)

[Ep #56: Reinforcing good behavior using Effective Positive Rewards](#)

[Ep #57: Teaching kids to Accept No Answers without issue](#)

[Ep #29: Traits of successful parents](#)

[Ep #58: The Teaching-Family Model is relationship focused](#)

[Ep #59: The ADHD Smarter Parenting Coaching process](#)

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