

A Volunteers Guide to Working with Nonverbal Wish Children

Nonverbal does not mean noncommunicative.

A child who does not use spoken words may still communicate through facial expressions, eye gaze, gestures, body movements, sounds, behavior, sign language, communication boards, AAC devices or support from parents and caregivers. Every child communicates differently. Always presume competence, speak directly to the child and use a respectful, age-appropriate tone. Your goal is not to become an expert in communication methods. Your goal is to be patient, observant and willing to meet the child where they are.

Before the Visit

Step	Why It Matters
Review the Communication Profile	This helps you understand how the child communicates, indicates yes/no, shows likes/dislikes and responds to sensory input.
Talk with your wish partner	Make sure you are both aligned before meeting the family.
Ask staff questions early	Reach out if anything in the profile is unclear or concerning.
Consider the child's routine	Schedule a time when the child can be awake and present without disrupting rest, therapies or medical needs.
Plan an appropriate icebreaker	Choose something based on the child's interests, sensory preferences, physical abilities, developmental age as well as chronological age.

During the Visit

- Speak directly to the wish child.
- Position yourself near the child's eye level when appropriate.
- Follow the family's lead on tone, pace, question style and response time.
- Watch for eye gaze, facial expressions, body movements, sounds, reaching, pointing or changes in behavior.
- Allow extra time after asking a question. Try silently counting to five before repeating or rephrasing.
- Do not assume the child is not listening if they are not looking at you.
- Do not rush the child or pressure them to respond quickly.
- If the child uses a communication device, remember that the device is their voice. Ask before touching or moving it.

Asking Questions

For some children, open-ended questions may work well. For others, yes/no questions, either/or choices, pictures or objects may be more helpful.

Instead of asking...	Try asking...
What is your favorite color?	I see a lot of pink in your room. Do you like pink?
What do you want to do?	Do you like music, movies, animals, being outside or something else?
What makes you happy?	Can you show me what you like?
Do you want chocolate or vanilla?	Do you like chocolate, vanilla or another flavor?

Choices can be helpful but be careful not to limit the child's options too much. Use choices as a starting point, not a box.

Partnering with Parents, Guardians and Siblings

Parents and guardians are often the best experts on how their child communicates. Some families may also feel protective, tired or overwhelmed from years of advocating for their child. Approach conversations with patience, compassion and curiosity. They can help you understand the child's communication style, interests, routines, sensory needs and signs of joy or discomfort. When a parent, guardian or sibling shares something about the wish child's preferences, use follow-up questions to better understand how the child communicates that preference.

If they share...	You can ask...
"She loves this."	What does it usually look like when she is enjoying something?
"He does not like that."	Are there signs we should watch for that tell us he is uncomfortable or overwhelmed?
"She wants this wish."	Can you tell us more about what makes this wish idea meaningful for her?
"He enjoys this activity."	What does it usually look like when he is enjoying that activity or wants to keep engaging?

Siblings may also know favorite toys, shows, songs, comfort items or small cues that others may miss. When appropriate, include them by asking what the wish child enjoys, what they like to do together and what they think would make the wish experience meaningful.

Discovering the Wish

As with every wish discovery, the wish should center on the wish child and what will bring them hope, strength and joy. Let wish ideas develop naturally. Avoid suggesting specific wishes or steering the family toward a particular idea.

Look for clues in:

- Communication Profile
- Bedroom, toys, clothing or comfort items
- Favorite characters, music, colors or textures
- Reactions to sound, light, crowds or movement
- Activities that bring joy
- Family and sibling observations

If a wish idea seems to conflict with something in the Communication Profile or intake, ask respectful follow-up questions rather than shutting the idea down.

Example:

“I noticed the Communication Profile mentions that loud spaces and crowds can be overwhelming. How do you think she would do in that environment?”

Then include your observations in your notes for staff.

Sensory-Friendly Icebreakers and Wish Boosts

Consider	Ask Yourself
Sensory experience	Would lights, sounds, textures, scents or movement be enjoyable or overwhelming?
Ability to use	Can the child activate or enjoy it without frustration?
Location	Can it be used in a wheelchair, bed, car seat, tray or side-lying position if applicable to the child?
Age appropriateness	Does it fit both the child’s developmental age and chronological age?
Interaction	Can the child enjoy it with parents, siblings or caregivers?
Safety	Are there choking hazards, sharp pieces, medical concerns or supervision needs?
Possible ideas	Fidgets, soft blankets, cause-and-effect toys, music, picture books, sensory items, favorite character items, visual countdowns or themed comfort items.

Contact Staff When...

Please reach out to Make-A-Wish staff if you have questions about the Communication Profile, receive information that conflicts with the profile, are unsure how to approach the conversation, have medical/sensory/safety/policy concerns or need help thinking through appropriate icebreakers, wish boosts or enhancements. You are not expected to have every answer. Your care, patience and willingness to follow the child’s lead are what help create a meaningful wish experience.