

How might body-listening open up space for body-languaging?

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4c How might body-listening open up space for body-languaging?

Ruth Churchill Dower

Abstract

This chapter discusses the challenges posed by the increasing focus on language and literacy targets in educational settings, combined with the uptick in diagnoses for non-speaking children. In exploring why an emphasis on spoken language can pathologise and limit children's efficacy to be productive communicators, this chapter takes a refreshing dive into new ways of sensing, being-with, interacting, and attuning to children's different rhythms, vibrations, and intensities. The author explores how body-listening to body-languages can broaden what we think young children are capable of beyond standard language and communication skills. Using examples of recent research with non-speaking families, this chapter offers ideas for how to listen differently through movement, sensory, and kinaesthetic interactions. Ultimately it explores how sensory practices can open valuable routes to attuning with nonlingual children in highly productive ways, emphasising that body-languaging is a fluid, relational process rather than a set of skills to master.

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Introduction

Question: How easy is it to *not talk* to our youngest children? I mean, to share the same spaces with them, playing, moving, digging, building, perhaps even singing or making funny sounds together, enjoying sharing the space, but *not* talking? Even if you are an excellent listener, if you are also a talker, it is actually quite hard to resist! I wonder where those spaces are for being, reflecting, thinking, creating, and doing together, without the need for continual talk? Where is the space to watch, take in, sense, listen to, feel, be touched by, and interact with (what I call 'body-listening') each other's funny little ways of expressing our likes and dislikes, our curiosities and emotions, our thoughts and ideas about the world, in head-tilts, tongue-twists, hand-dances, foot-taps, guttural-utterances, and unplanned actions that our bodies can't help but release (what I call 'body-languaging')? In this chapter I will explore how *body-listening* to children's *body-languaging* can broaden adults' experiences of young children's capabilities beyond the usual definitions of language and communication goals. I

will discuss how educational definitions of ‘progress’ in speech can be oppressive for children who experience and express their worlds differently. I also offer some examples and ideas of how sensory practices can open valuable routes to attuning with nonlingual children in highly generative and productive ways for both children and adults.

Researching nonlingual ways of being through movement

Practices that attune to children’s multimodal languages are not always easy, especially when body languages – often considered insignificant – are the predominant way a child expresses themselves. Although it may not be obvious, sensory attunement is often nurtured by reciprocating small expressions of body languages, and this attunement can open up relationships with children to their creative potential beyond simply meeting basic communication needs. This practice needs *practice*, which is what I tried to do as a curious learner with my PhD research participants. These were all families with a child under the age of 5 years who often does not speak outside of their homes, even to close relatives and friends. The families attended six weeks of research sessions (one a week) over Zoom during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK, followed by two months of weekly face-to-face sessions in an art gallery. They came with a slightly hesitant curiosity about my research into moving-not-talking, and a willingness to play-with, think-with, move-with, and enjoy these spaces for *nonlingual* expression. I am a doctoral researcher at Manchester Metropolitan University with an interest in neurodivergent ways of moving, relating, not talking, and still feeling capable and creative. I say ‘still’ because there are lots of ways of being and knowing that are valued in young children’s lives, but not-talking is usually *not* one of them. I come to this research with a long history of arts education practice, as a former drama teacher, a musician, a physical theatre practitioner (often combining mime with dance), and as the founder of Earlyarts – a research and training consultancy for arts and early education professionals.

Research with nonlingual children (such as children diagnosed with selective mutism or autism) often advocates strategies and therapies that encourage nonlingual children to talk (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2014; Jones & Odell-Miller, 2022; Kovac & Furr, 2019). However, the increasing over-focus on literacy, language, and social communication targets in educational settings, combined with vocalising treatments designed with the best of intentions for a child’s social integration, can sometimes be counter-productive to a child’s sense of

confidence, capability, and well-being. My research proposes an alternative approach that broadens how children's expressions are defined, and the creative ways of tuning in to them. It focuses on how we can listen differently to children's many languages and ways of being in the world, some of which are, frankly, much more exciting than talk. Turning normative expectations on their head means considering what it would take for *adults* to become confident and competent in *not-talking*. There's a challenge! Therefore, in this chapter I draw from my research to ask two key questions: How might we attune to children's (and adults') body-languages? And could (adult) practices of body-listening help amplify the value of (children's) body-languaging in early education and care?

To explore these questions further, I describe how two non-speaking 4-year-olds from different families were invited to experiment with sensory, collaborative movements, whilst their significant adults practised listening-with their and their child's body languages. Spontaneous and surprising movements become co-produced as a result of moving in ways and spaces that welcome different ways of becoming, and knowing, *with* the world. In this space, moving together seems to offer physical and sensory challenges that these children – often made to feel in some ways incapable with speech – are only too delighted to try out and play-around-with using their finely-honed expertise. By curating conditions that are welcoming and relaxing (with no expectations to speak) in places of creativity that are interesting to children (such as an art gallery), perhaps these opportunities for deeper engagement with touch, sensory, proprioceptive, and kinetic languages might be enough for children to feel supported in communicating without words. After all, children appear to have little problem with nonlingual expression.

The following images and vignettes animate key moments of sensory attunement that left their mark on my bodymind during the research and have resonated with me since.

<insert figure 4c.1 here>

[Figure 4c.1](#): Preparing the art gallery setting for nonlingual movement research.

Vignette 1

I am about to do some movement improvisation with six children and their parents in an art gallery space. It has large windows across the width of the sloped ceiling, letting in strong beams of light that reveal the dust particles fizzing and dancing

amongst us. As I am setting up the space before the families arrive, I enjoy a few moments of standing within the beams and dancing-with the particles. My hands chase these elusive dust particles, disrupting their flow, trying to order them into circular motions, but they are always faster than me, moving out of the way before I can even touch them. Their ability to always outwit me makes me laugh out loud.

Around the walls are 20 contemporary paintings by a local artist, full of colours, shapes, textures, objects, and figures that also seem to be moving within their own, curious stories. This is the venue for four weeks of fieldwork sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, where we are permitted to meet whilst observing social distancing rules. I dance with a large teddy bear, whilst each parent and child dance together within their 'family bubble'. Each bubble has a small pop-up tent to hide in or explore as they wish, and several blankets, duvets and cushions around their tent to make the gallery floor a little more inviting of collaborations. All adults are masked and required to sanitise hands on entry. I wear a full-face transparent visor to ensure my lips can be read even if my words are blurred.

As big and little bodies enter the space and choose a 'den', I notice the space being filled with adult voices greeting each other, getting comfy on their cushions, helping their child remove shoes and coats, rearranging jumpers and brushing hair. There are no child voices. There are, however, lots of body languages being exchanged as children look around at the windows, their dens, the dancing dust columns and the art works, sometimes sneaking a glance at me or each other. They often look carefully at their parent, drawing them close with their hands or feet and listening intently with their bodies to the conversations being had. Parental voice seems to draw out reassurance and one or two children smile or nod as parents bring them into the chatter. The atmosphere is full of wonder and anticipation as I welcome the families and invite them to spend some time enjoying movement explorations together (based on some provocations I offer with unusual materials). I gently reiterate that I have no expectations for children to speak, even if I might chat with them as we move.

What's the problem with talking?

Spoken language is increasingly considered an important measure of competence in young children, with many curricula emphasising the importance of gaining ‘proper’ communication skills from the early years. By implication, this suggests that a child who does not speak is incompetent or, worse, not a ‘proper’ child, and there is often an emphasis on potential failure in later life (e.g., Mroz, 2012; Nuffield Foundation Education Limited, 2021; Pro Bono Economics, 2024). Several scholars have critiqued this pathologisation of not-speaking (e.g., Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016; MacLure, 2016; MacLure et al., 2010; Murriss, 2016). Indeed, Murriss (2016) asserts that these orthodox approaches create injustices that constrain children’s sensory knowing. I use the term ‘injustices’ because these approaches increase the risk that nonlingual ways of being are considered less valuable, less trustworthy, and less important than lingual knowledge with all its traits, prejudices, sleights of hand and twists of tongue.

Through my fieldwork sessions, I introduced practices that treat language not as a disembodied, solely cognitive process that arises with the so-called ‘natural’ growth and development of the child through age-appropriate norms (Murriss, 2016), but as an expression of how the body, mind, and senses engage with the world together, all the time, through body-languaging. Just as thoughts are not created in some kind of cognitive vacuum, a person’s actions, movements, and being are all created in relational and dynamic processes (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). Yet, because they don’t quite register as solid, demonstrable, cognitive ‘skills’, young children’s nonlingual languages can prove challenging to recognise and learn-with in spaces that are not conducive to their more-than-bodily expressions. The textures, soft textiles, hidey-holes, light windows, fizzing atmospheres, and generous spaces (with slidey floors) in which we moved during the research sessions were an attempt to invite and acknowledge the legitimacy of nonlingual practices through bodies rather than words.

In the same vein, Olsson (2009) nurtures an ambition for educators to become open to children’s many expressions. She encourages teachers to question the “predetermined map” of competences (2009, p. 13) designed to regulate children’s behaviours according to the normalising theories of developmental psychology and cognitive science. To resist these theories, which largely underpin education frameworks in the West, Olsson urges us to focus

on “the idea of the child as perpetually becoming and not being defined once and for all” (2009, p. 14). To put this ambition into practice, she suggests focusing less on what an individual child can or can’t do and more on the relationships, encounters, and preoccupations that happen between children’s bodies and their environments. This is what we did in our sessions.

<insert figure 4c.2 here>

Figure 4c.2: Jumping, running, fizzing, and flying around the art gallery

Vignette 2

During the first session at the gallery, parents and children are engaging in a gentle, sensory exploration of hands using brushes, pouring jugs and water. The atmosphere is relaxed and calm with an undercurrent of humming (from me) and giggling (from families) as their skins experience tickles, splashes and rubs. But this stillness does not correspond with the jumping forces in the body of **Jumper** (not her real name) which call out with vim and vigour to map out circuits of the whole gallery space. Jumper begins to run around the gallery space in between tents and around the outside of the tent circle. Her sister follows her, apparently quite excited by the possibilities of space, bodies, slidey feet, and fast legs. Mum has already pulled sheepskin sock-slippers onto their feet, which make a fabulous slapping, splatting sound on the gallery floor as they run. Slap-splat-slap-splat-slappity-splat, interspersed with jumps and squeals of delight.

At the end of each circuit, they jump onto the sofas in the far corner of the gallery, rolling about on their plush leather seats. Jumper’s squeals of unbridled excitement encourage her sister to join-in-with the game. Jumper climbs higher onto the back of the sofa and walks gingerly along the back, arms out for balance, jumping from one sofa to the next and back again. Having navigated these slippery, knobbly leather trails, Jumper then jumps backwards into the seat, flipping her body horizontally, trusting in the softness of its leathery sponge to catch her landing. Her little sister seems content to slap the sides and arms of the sofa as she, too, squeals with delight at each of her sister’s crash landings. Then off they go again running round and round

the gallery, big sister followed by little sister, little matching dress dancing to the tune of big matching dress.

Meanwhile, mum and dad's bodies are crouching tensely in front of their tent, sitting back on their haunches like coiled springs, perhaps feeling a little exposed. Glances are exchanged, senses on high alert to the squeals and shrieks of entangled dress-slipper-sofa-dances going on behind them. An anxious face calls to the girls and a finger lifts to the lips, making a 'shush' sound. Their bodies seem disturbed by the possible disturbances of other bodies. Dad brings the girls back to their tent twice, before they jump back into action and fly off again. Mum offers me a look of apology across the tent-circle and I respond with relaxed smiles and invitations not to worry. There are no expectations for 'regulated' behaviours in this space.

But, of course, there are. The atmosphere is thick with the wider social pressures to be considered more or less 'normal'. All the research families are caught up in a struggle of 'being' and 'becoming', of accepting the different ways their child might explore and express themselves in the world, and of wondering if there are other 'right', 'correct', or more 'normal' ways to be. Even in this light, comfortable gallery where we care for each other and make space for doing things differently, parents nonetheless talk of their hopes for deeper understanding and possible relief from this struggle. But this is not a space for meaning-making; there are no solutions, resolutions, or revolutions here. Just a space to experiment with what might be.

Working with sense rather than meaning

Olsson (2009) discusses how the meanings generated through children's movements are often a far cry from how adults interpret them, as if a truth exists about how a child 'should' move or be in control of their body, regardless of the forces interacting with them. Rather than searching for a *meaning*, which can only ever be understood through individual bodies, Olsson encourages educators to discover *sense*. Sense is continually and collectively produced through the relations children make with other bodies, materials, and spaces. By attending to the general sense rather than the specific meanings that children produce through their sounds, speech, and actions, Olsson suggests, educators can become skilled at noticing

what kind of sense (including nonsense) or problems children are making, even when language is not spoken or when children's actions might appear to diverge from the norm. Olsson explains further: "When looking at it from the point of view of not already given, but continuously produced sense, even children's oddest expressions are never random. It has become clear to many teachers that children produce sense all the time" (2009, p. 102). In other words, sense is not about fitting into a given meaning but about feeling well with the world. Seen from the perspective of the forces arising as a small body experiences the world in a large space, Jumper's jumping makes perfect sense.

<insert figure 4c.3 here>

Figure 4c.3: Jumping, swinging, flying bodies propelling themselves into different orbits

Vignette 3

Every time Jumper is picked up by adult hands, she lifts both feet as high as possible, as if trying to make the most of an assisted jump. It doesn't matter whether she is being lifted onto a lap, into a cuddle, off the sofa, or onto a chair, both feet go up as high as humanly possible, as if it's a reflex. These feet simply do not want to be on the ground, carrying weight, or marking time and space. Jumper's deceptively small body hides a million, huge jumps just straining to be let out wherever the environment urges her to do so. Her legs, arms and torso seem drawn to the sensations of swinging and flying – forces so great, that maybe her body could get airborne if it could only overcome gravity.

When children climb onto their adult to have a piggyback, Jumper takes a running jump and flies onto her dad's back. When children stand on their parent's feet to be walked around, to feel how their parent's body feels with wide legs and long strides, Jumper's legs simply won't stay straight. She jumps up, pushing her weight down into her mum's hands, to propel her legs upwards once again. This body seems to thrive on taking flight; its jumping-flying-swinging actions taking up twice the space of the still body. It is a tremendous achievement, a skill honed over many vertical and horizontal jumping experiments. It is an incredible way to make sense of this space, using the lightness of this small body so creatively to express the strong forces pulling her into orbit. Even if words were available to Jumper, it is possible they would not be

enough to articulate the intense expression of entangled physical, emotional, and sensorial satisfaction that this flying body appears to enjoy.

I consider Viruru's question, "what is lost when language is gained?" (2001, p. 31). In Jumper's case, her body might lose the opportunity to dance, the ability to fly, the skills to navigate space in three dimensions, to express the strong forces without and within, and to release the squeals and sounds of these forces as they satisfy her desires. It seems to me that these are all important competences that are neither measured nor valued in any national curriculum. What is more, such vital sensory expressions are often misunderstood and pathologised in the education system, putting them out of reach of being valued.

Most curricula are largely divided into outcomes for cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development. Although unable to answer the question 'what does it mean?' when a small body is compelled to fly through the air at great heights, educators can feel duty-bound to measure the more generic outcomes for Physical Development (as a prime area of learning in the curriculum) in ways which are disconnected from a body's other faculties. Nonlingual bodies frequently excel in the technical skill of jumping, rolling, running, skipping, and doing fiddly things with buttons, zips and laces, as the forces arising make a bid to express physically what cannot be said verbally. But the progress of these bodies often comes at a cost of having to regulate this liveliness in accordance with requirements for meaning-making in normative ways. These are meanings made to satisfy adult understandings about what is being learned, but they can have the effect of constraining children's own ways of body-languaging, of making sense (not meaning). Jumper's parents regularly provided the musculoskeletal scaffolding, strength, and balance for her smaller body to make sense of its need to learn and express in a certain way. Far from considering Jumper incapable or lacking, her parents' body-listening (even when it felt awkward) helped them engage with Jumper's important, intelligent, alternative ways of being and knowing in the world.

Sensory attunements offering new perspectives

When body-languaging makes sense across more than one body, we might say we are 'touched by' or 'in touch with' the other, meaning we share the same understanding. This happens continually, almost intuitively for some, through our senses. Like spiders feeling for

the vibrations of a fly, our sensing of each other's emotional or physical vibrations is how our bodies navigate the tangled webs of social and physical interaction (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). For nonlingual or divergent bodies whose senses might operate on different frequencies, tuning in takes practice. Body-listening means developing a sensory attunement to the different vibrations of body-languaging. It goes both/many ways: listening to the embodied expressions of others enables a more attuned reciprocity, drawing in a closer listening from the other(s), and becoming open to new perspectives on expression, potentiality, and relationality (Olsson, 2009). This practice is not necessarily about being still to listen or observe, but about being open and actively involved with the other without interpretation, expectation, or restriction, just as another of my research families demonstrates:

<insert figure 4c.4 here>

Figure 4c.4: Happy hands

Vignette 4

Dynamite (not his real name) is a dynamic force in the shape of a blurred body. He seems perfectly calm, happy, and relaxed when preparing for our movement improvisation sessions. His mum says he wants to tell me how much he enjoys them, as he offers me a tiny smile from behind her back. But the minute we begin exploring the space with a long, silk scarf, he is off. It is like he unzips his whole skin and out jumps a force of movement so great that his mum wonders if she will ever get it back inside again. Dynamite runs with the scarf around every inch and corner of the room, exploring its waves, circles, twists and textures. He runs with it wrapped around his head, his torso and his legs, often tripping and rolling over with peals of silent laughter. He is deeply in cahoots with this scarf, experimenting with its potentialities and trying to overcome their limitations. He runs so fast to make it fly above his head, climbing the cushions, chairs, and even tables in surrender to the mighty scarf. Whooshing-legs-silk-dancing-air-molecules become alive, enmeshed, speaking volumes without words until their forces are exhausted and come to settle in stillness again.

In another session, we wonder how hands can dance together. Mum, Dynamite and little brother play with patting, slapping, clapping, tapping, mirroring, and folding

each other's hands within their own. Different sizes, shapes, textures, stickinesses, and smoothnesses are explored in these motions, bringing attention to the many differences in each hand. The dances draw us into an intimate looking, feeling, touching and sensing the haptic and animate nature of each palm, digit, nail, and knuckle. It seems there are so many worlds to explore in the lines, creases, flexibility and stiffness of each hand. But more than what can be observed is what can be felt. It seems almost imperceptible in the familiarity of touch between the boys and mum, but there is a sense of deep knowing between them, of love and trust, of care-full-ness and care-free-ness. These feel like happy hands. How this can be sensed from experiencing three hands dancing together in a brief, wordless encounter, I do not know. But these are the words that emerge in my body from witnessing this encounter.

In this encounter there are vibrations, frequencies, intensities, and sensations that I cannot put into words, despite that my body is able to feel them. The closest I come is in having a sense of joy in their 'happy hands' from the registers I experience in their faces and how these resonate deep within my body. How often must our bodies attune to the offerings of other bodies in the world, either present, virtual, or in our memories, and register sensations that are as strong as words (perhaps stronger) but without an articulable meaning? Dance scholar and philosopher, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2011), considers body languages as highly important and calls for greater legitimacy to be afforded them in education. Reminding us that body language emerges *prior* to spoken language, Sheets-Johnson refers to movement as the "mother tongue" and "the foundation of our conceptual life" (2011, p. xxiii) and suggests that "rather than speak of the period before language as the pre-linguistic, we should speak of the advent of language as post kinetic" (2011, p. xxxi).

However, rather than think of body-languages as separate, labelled entities (e.g., sensory or kinetic; verbal or nonverbal), I support Badwan's (2021) emphasis on the singular form of 'language', particularly the use of the verb 'linguaging'. This use enhances the notion of language as a fluid process, a complex multitude of expressions that includes the histories, cultures, and environments that come with each body. In other words, body-linguaging (as opposed to body-languages) signals multimodal, multisensory practices and meanings which are not divorced from *who* a body is and *what* a body brings into the world. This is especially

useful for considering nonlingual bodies not as lacking or incapable, but as overflowing with rich possibilities. Dynamite did not speak a word during these sessions, but his languaging was alive with the depth and breadth of knowledges he has and continues to acquire/create in his experiments with materials, movement, and dancing. As Olsson reminds us, “rather than working with trivial universals, [this way of working] harbours a more complex, deep and creative approach to learning” (2009, p.18).

Ethical and educational possibilities

To engage in practices of body-listening and body-languaging is both a political and an ethical move that counters the oppressions of linear, developmental projects. Olsson (2009) invites us to think of this as an ethics of “uncertainty” where a practice of “collective, intense, and unpredictable experimentation” (2009, p. 83) challenges the universalised ethics that are often reduced to technical skills-based measures which mark a child as incompetent. For adults working with children who do not always speak, this might mean reducing questions, curbing the need to understand better, improvising more, allowing curiosity to grow, and making time and space to play and learn alongside. In other words, it means listening together for children’s different ways of languaging.

Jumper and Dynamite invited their parents to collaborate with the forces in their bodies by feeling and responding to their different rhythms, vibrations, sounds, and affects. These are how their bodies sense, make sense, and become open to more of their potentiality as they explore their worlds. Their body-languages are unpredictable, intense, and immeasurable, and yet generative of intelligent and highly capable knowing and being. It is easier for these children to generate greater potential when the space is unregulated and open to affective, embodied, and sensorial expressions. Over only a few weeks, the research parents became more confident to move with their children in improvised ways, to value and extend their body-languaging and become open to sensory expressions. They sat with the discomforts of listening-through-moving with adult bodies to witness many moments of joy, humour, and openly verbalised language, whilst entangled in their children’s evolving dances. The learning, skills, and confidence gained by the adults seemed to open up both ethical and educational possibilities for recognising and valuing children’s nonlingual ways of being that are still being practised in homes and classrooms.

<insert figure 4c.5 here>

Figure 4c.5: Families listening with their bodies and attuning to nonlingual expressions

I propose that these practices can create a space that allows expression through listening and listening through expression – neither seems enough on its own. Listening signals to a nonlingual child that their languages, no matter how silent, are seen/heard/felt/sensed and valued. Listening encourages trust, motivates ideas, and inspires expression. Listening says, “I am not going to ‘fill in’ your voice; I will hold the space for you to experiment with different ways of being, as capable and creative, with or without words.” Listening also creates space for adult bodies to find new ways of learning, teaching, being capable and creative with children. The movements of body-listening and body-languaging are so entangled that there is no beginning or end, just many possibilities from which emerge new productivities, experimentations, inklings, ideas, and languages.

This kind of body-listening helps to shift the centrifugal forces away from the notion of ‘child’ as a predetermined being, away from a normative approach to development, and away from socially constructed identities of having or not having, of being or not being, of progressing or lacking, of speaking or not speaking. Spaces that replace simplistic binaries with divergent complexity are important because, as Olsson highlights, “the only thing one can do is to create more space for desiring bodies to expand their capacities; [because] we do not know what a child [...] can do” (2009, p. 187).

Photo credits: Ruth Churchill Dower.

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