

How to Skype With A Non-Verbal Child

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It's easier than ever to connect with anyone in the world thanks to the internet. You can email, instant message, Facebook or Skype. The list goes on and on. Just about anybody who wants to communicate can do so this way. But what about those individuals who lack the ability to communicate but still have the desire to connect? How do parents reach out and connect with their children who are in residential school settings?

I have two sons who both go away to school and room on their school's campus. My older son, Jay, is a freshman at Salisbury University and my younger son, Jason, is a student at the Benedictine School. For Jay connecting with me is as easy as him calling from his cellphone, face-time, text, Skype or email. Trust me, when he needs something he has no problem tracking me down. For Jason there are many more challenges. Jason is 17, autistic and non-verbal. He does have his own system for communicating but one needs to be present to see his communication. He uses some Sign Language, a lot of pointing and most of the time he will bring the desired object or need to the person with him at the time. Trying to talk to Jason on the telephone isn't effective because he lacks

verbal communication and I never know if he is still on the line or if he has wondered off leaving me on the other line holding a one sided conversation. As a mom I have a primal need to see him, to observe him and to connect face to face even when we are 100 miles apart. I have come to love Skype for these reasons.

When I first started Skyping with Jason it felt awkward and unnatural. It was very one sided-on my side, and Jason spent our first session tapping on his computer screen pointing at all the things in the room I was in that he recognized. I tried not to sound like a commentator at an event listing off play by play action, "See the puppies Jason? They miss you. Look Jason, Quinn is home. Now mommy is going to walk into the family room." I was just observing things and relaying them back to him. I was lacking the skill of how to involve him. I've learned since that with some practice it is quite easy and fun. Furthermore, how important it is that I leave time for Jason to communicate after being prompted. Here are some ideas for families that are new to this or would like to try:

1- Skype While Making Dinner- The kitchen is usually the most familiar place to everyone in the family. When on Skype with Jason this allows me to have a natural conversation about my day, what I'm doing and ask for his input. I can offer him choices to participate in making meals by suggesting he picks what goes next in the salad, carrots or celery? He responds by nodding his head or saying no (one of the few words he has). Try to Skype a day or so before your child's next visit home and have



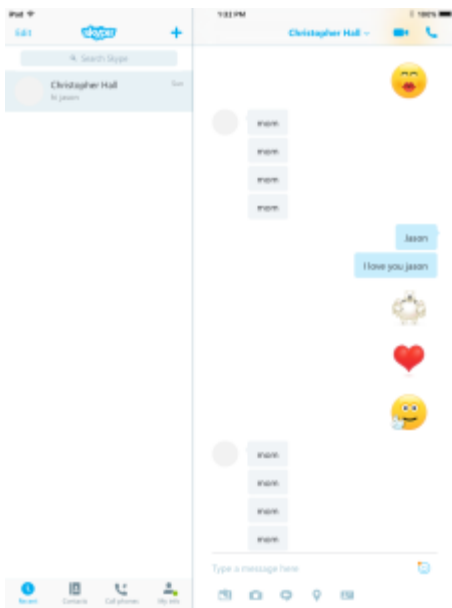
them help you make something that they will be having when they arrive. It's a great way to create continuity between the virtual conversation and their real life.

2-Skype During Family Events- With our kids at school much of the year it is common they may miss out on family events. If you are having a birthday party for someone, a school event for a sibling or even just watching an NFL game on Sunday, this is a great time to include your child who can't be there in person. I have never noticed Jason feeling left out when we do this but see that he is excited to be part of the commotion and see what is going on. A great follow up is to send still picture to your student so they can continue to enjoy the event they were part of.

3- Get Silly- Although no one else wants to see it, Jason loves watching me do my hair and put on make-up while Skyping. When he is home these actions actually create anxiety in him because he associates it with me leaving the house. However on Skype he loves this activity. I do spend most of these sessions making silly faces at him and performing ridiculous close ups of my eye lashes but he digs it. It's another example of natural events happening in the home that our residential school children can be part of. I'd also like to thank the staff in Jason's dorm for never making me feel foolish or blackmailing me with any screen shots of me at my craziest!

4- Send a Package and Open It Together- Many times Jason and I will Skype while I am packing him a care package. I show him all the items I am putting in the box and get his approval. The staff is incredible at helping me coordinate a time to watch Jason open the box when it arrives. I can see the recognition on his face that this was something we had done together a few days earlier and he loves it!

5- Let Them Speak- I know that sounds odd considering the child may be non-verbal or limited in verbal communication, however all kids have their own way of communicating. I have to remind myself often to pause from my rambling commentary to allow Jason time to make sounds or to try using his words. I remind myself often, it's a conversation, not a speech. Skype also allows instant messaging to occur during the live conversation. This is Jason's favorite way to participate. He really likes to type my name!



Skype Conversation With Jason

As parents of children with special needs in a residential setting we face some obstacles and challenges that other parents do not. We all want to connect, share and participate in our children's daily life and we now have a tool that makes this easier. We are so fortunate that The Benedictine School makes Skype and other tools available for our families and they genuinely encourage us to get involved. I invite you to give it a try, if you have not already, or try some of the ideas above to keep the conversations going.