

Transcript — Reduce classroom interruptions without saying a word (Nonverbal signals)

[\[00:00\] When students struggle asking for help](#)

[\[00:54\] What are nonverbal signals?](#)

[\[01:24\] Step 1: Choose symbols](#)

[\[01:44\] Step 2: Teach signals](#)

[\[02:19\] Step 3: Review regularly](#)

[\[02:40\] Why it works \(especially for ADHD students\)](#)

[\[03:29\] Dos and don'ts](#)

[\[04:10\] Recap and next steps](#)

[00:00] When students struggle asking for help

Stephanie DeLussey: For some students, raising a hand feels like having a spotlight shining on them in the moment. Maybe they're shy, maybe they process more slowly than peers, maybe they just don't want everyone to know they need help.

[Description: A person with long wavy brown hair, wearing a white cardigan over a gray shirt, sits at a wooden desk in a classroom. They speak directly to the camera. Behind them, educational posters are pinned to a wall. A globe and various school supplies sit on the desk in front of them.

Transition to various shots. A teacher sits on a desk holding a laptop as a

student raises their hand. Three large spotlights turn on, creating a bright spotlight. A student sits at a desk, with their hand on their head while writing. Then back to the speaker.]

What if I told you there's an easy way to communicate with them without all of the attention?

It's a strategy called nonverbal signals. It's a great way for you and your students to communicate with each other — quietly, quickly, and discreetly.

By the end of this video, you'll learn how to use nonverbal signals, why they work — especially for students with ADHD and other learning differences — and some dos and don'ts, including a tip for DIY visual supports.

[On-screen text and description: An animated graphic appears listing the three main learning points. A bell chimes each time one of the bullet points appears onscreen.

Today, you'll learn

- How to use nonverbal signals
- Why they work
- Key watch-outs]

Hi, I'm Stephanie DeLussey. I'm a dual-certified special education teacher with over 10 years of experience across multiple states and grade levels.

Nonverbal signals — also referred to as silent signals — is a positive behavior strategy that fosters communication while limiting interruptions during instruction. It's great for all classrooms, from STEM classrooms to kindergartens.

Let's dive in to how to use this strategy.

[00:54] What are nonverbal signals?

[Description: A title card appears on a cream background with the text: "What it is — and how to use it." A blue highlight moves over the text as Stephanie reads the title. Then back to Stephanie speaking directly to the camera.]

What exactly are nonverbal signals?

They're small gestures for communication. A thumbs up can mean "I get it." A simple C-shape might mean "can you clarify?" While making a W sign means "I need a water break."

[Description: Stephanie shows a thumbs up sign, a C-shape formed with the left hand, and a W sign using three fingers on the right hand.]

And some teachers use the 1, 2, 3 system.

[Description: Stephanie holds up one, two, and three fingers.]

One finger means "I get it." Two fingers means "I need a little bit of help." And three fingers means "I'm lost and I need a lot of help."

[Description: Stephanie holds up one, two, and three fingers while describing each item.]

Before you know it, your classroom has its own quiet communication without added chaos.

Here are three simple steps to make nonverbal signals work.

[01:24] Step 1: Choose symbols

[Description: Stephanie holds up one finger. An animated graphic shows the number 1 next to the text "Choose a few symbols to teach."]

Step one, choose a few symbols to teach. Explain that, as a class, you'll develop shared signals that can be used for communicating quietly with one another.

Talk about how these signals are useful for limiting interruptions or for when you're giving instruction.

Pick a handful of signals that will help solve your most common interruptions, things like bathroom breaks, help requests, or check-ins for understanding.

[01:44] Step 2: Teach signals

[Description: Stephanie holds up two fingers. An animated graphic shows the number 2 next to the text "Teach the signals to your students."]

Step two, teach the signals. Show your students what each signal looks like and when to use it.

With younger students, introduce one signal each week so they can really practice it. Explicitly teach how to use the nonverbal cues through modeling the signals and role-playing so that everyone learns the signals.

Act out real classroom moments. For example, you could say something like, "You're in the middle of group work and need to ask a question. Which signal could you use?"

Make sure to ask your students for input about the signals, too. You might

find they have creative ideas or cultural considerations you hadn't thought of. That collaboration builds ownership and a stronger classroom community.

[02:19] Step 3: Review regularly

[Description: Stephanie holds up three fingers. An animated graphic shows the number 3 next to the text "Review the signals regularly."]

Step three, review the signals regularly. At the beginning, make sure to name the signals as you use them until most students are using them consistently. Post a visual guide on your front board and display it during lessons.

Then, review signals after breaks or when new students join. For some learners — especially students who learn and think differently, or English language learners — verbal reminders and repetition really help.

[02:40] Why it works (especially for ADHD students)

[Description: A title card appears on a cream background with the text: "Why this strategy works." A blue highlight moves over the text as Stephanie reads the title. Then back to Stephanie speaking directly to the camera.]

Why do nonverbal signals work? Well, here's the beauty of this strategy. It's not just about saving time or eliminating interruptions, it's about inclusion and communication.

Students who have ADHD, dyslexia, or other learning differences often struggle with executive function. Skills like staying focused, managing

impulses, or knowing when to ask for help.

You may find yourself repeatedly responding to requests for bathroom breaks, to sharpen a pencil, or asking students to quiet down. These small interruptions can add up, disrupting routines and taking time away from instruction.

Nonverbal signals allow you to respond to students without calling unwanted attention to them. They're especially helpful for students who may need repeat reminders.

Plus, nonverbal signals are an effective way for kids to communicate with you and for you to check for understanding. They create a classroom culture where communication feels safe, respectful, and shared.

[03:29] Dos and don'ts

[Description: A title card appears on a cream background with the text: "What to do — and what to avoid." A blue highlight moves over the text as Stephanie reads the title. Then back to Stephanie speaking directly to the camera.]

Before you get started with nonverbal signals, here are a few important dos and don'ts.

[Description: As Stephanie speaks, each "do" point appears onscreen with a green checkmark.]

Do use visual supports for the signals. Try making your own by taking photos of your students using the signals. And then provide a handout version for students who want one at their desks.

Do encourage students to tell you privately if a signal doesn't feel right for them.

And do use this for individual students, too. You can co-create signals with your students who frequently need specific reminders.

[Description: As Stephanie speaks, each "don't" point appears onscreen with a red X.]

Don't overload students with too many signals at once. A few clear signals are better than too many. We recommend starting with three to five.

Don't assume all students can make every gesture easily. Provide modifications as needed.

And don't use signals to create a "silent classroom" rule. You're using these signals for communication and not as compliance.

[04:10] Recap and next steps

Nonverbal signals give every student — from the most talkative to the most reserved — a voice.

And they remind us that, in a truly inclusive classroom, everyone has a way to be heard, even without saying a word.

If you want to build on this, our previous episode on respectful redirection shows how to calmly respond when students go off track in the moment. You can watch that next, or explore the whole positive behavior strategies playlist.

And make sure to subscribe for more resources like these.

[**On-screen text:** As Stephanie speaks, links appear onscreen for "More videos:" [How to redirect students without embarrassing them](#), and the ["Subscribe" button with the Understood logo](#).

Transition to the [Understood](#) logo and the [3M](#) logo side-by-side.]