

Practical Guide for Parents of Nonverbal Toddlers with Autism

First—What This Means for You

If your toddler has just been diagnosed with autism and isn't yet using words, it's completely normal to feel a mix of urgency, confusion, and concern. The most important thing to know is this: **there is a clear path forward**, and what you do over the next months matters—but it doesn't need to be perfect to be effective.

This guide is designed to be a practical overview. Think of it as a roadmap you can actually follow.

The Big Priorities (Keep These in Mind)

If everything else feels overwhelming, focus on these four things:

1. **Start early intervention as soon as possible**
 2. **Build communication (even without speech)**
 3. **Create predictable, structured routines**
 4. **Be consistent across home, therapy, and daycare**
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1. What to Do at Home (Day-to-Day)

A. Build Communication Into Everything

Your child does not need words to communicate.

Start here:

- Respond to **any attempt** to communicate (pointing, reaching, sounds, eye gaze)
- Pause during routines (snacks, play) to give them a chance to initiate
- Offer **choices** ("Do you want apple or cracker?")

Work toward:

- Using **AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)**:
 - Picture Exchange (PECS)
 - Simple sign language
 - Communication devices (with guidance from an SLP)

Key mindset: *Communication comes before speech.*

B. Use Simple, Predictable Routines

Children with autism learn best when life is predictable.

- Keep daily routines consistent (meals, sleep, play)
- Use **visual supports** (pictures showing what comes next)
- Give warnings before transitions ("2 more minutes, then bath")

C. Teach Skills in Small Steps

Break everything down.

Instead of: "Put on your shoes" Try:

1. Sit down
2. Pick up shoe
3. Put foot in

Celebrate small wins. That's how progress happens.

D. Use Positive Reinforcement

When your child does something you want to see again—**reward it immediately**.

Rewards can be:

- A favorite toy
- A snack
- Praise (if meaningful to them)

What matters is: *the reward matches what motivates your child.*

E. Reduce Frustration Before It Starts

Many challenging behaviours come from communication frustration.

You can reduce this by:

- Teaching an easier way to communicate (AAC, gestures)
 - Keeping demands at the right level
 - Watching for early signs of overwhelm
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2. Navigating Services in Ontario (Without Getting Lost)

Start Here

- Register with the **Ontario Autism Program (OAP)** immediately
- Connect with your local **Children's Treatment Centre (CTC)**

Also Access:

- **Speech-Language Pathology (SLP)** → priority for nonverbal children
- **Occupational Therapy (OT)** → sensory, play, daily skills

Helpful Supports

- **Autism Ontario** → parent education + support groups
- **EarlyON Centres** → free early childhood programs
- **Special Services at Home (SSAH)** → funding support
- **Assistive Devices Program (ADP)** → AAC funding

Don't wait for the "perfect" program. **Start something.**

3. Working With Your Child's Doctor

Your primary care provider should:

- Help coordinate referrals (SLP, OT, developmental pediatrics)
- Monitor development over time
- Screen for common co-occurring issues:
 - Sleep problems
 - Feeding difficulties
 - GI concerns

What helps them help you:

- Bring specific concerns ("not pointing," "not responding to name")
- Share therapy updates
- Ask for documentation when needed (OAP, school supports)

4. Preparing for Daycare and School

Before Entry

- Share your child's diagnosis and communication needs early
- Provide any therapy recommendations or reports

At School Entry

Your child should have an **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)**.

Key priorities in the IEP:

- Functional communication (including AAC)
- Social engagement
- Behaviour regulation

What Actually Helps in Classrooms

- Visual schedules
- Consistent routines
- Simple language
- Extra processing time
- Reinforcement systems

Non-Negotiable

If your child uses AAC, **everyone must use it consistently**.

5. The First 90 Days After Diagnosis (Step-by-Step)

Weeks 1–2: Stabilize and Start

Focus: Getting oriented

- Register for **Ontario Autism Program (OAP)**
- Contact your **Children's Treatment Centre (CTC)**
- Book or confirm **SLP referral** (priority)
- Start observing your child's communication:
 - How do they request?
 - What motivates them?

At home:

- Begin offering choices
 - Start pausing to encourage communication
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Weeks 3–4: Build Your Team

Focus: Putting supports in place

- Begin SLP (if available)
- Ask about **AAC options**
- Explore ABA or NDBI-based programs
- Connect with **Autism Ontario**

At home:

- Start using **simple visual supports**
 - Reinforce all communication attempts
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Month 2: Start Structured Teaching

Focus: Consistency and skill-building

- Begin regular therapy (SLP + behavioural if available)
- Learn strategies from therapists and **use them daily**

At home:

- Practice communication during routines (meals, play)
 - Introduce simple skill-building (imitation, following directions)
 - Use reinforcement intentionally
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Month 3: Expand and Coordinate

Focus: Making everything work together

- Ensure consistency across:
 - Home
 - Therapy
 - Daycare (if applicable)

- If in daycare:
 - Share communication strategies
 - Introduce AAC system there

At home:

- Increase expectations slightly (with support)
 - Track small gains (this matters more than big milestones)
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6. What Progress Actually Looks Like

Progress may not look like speech right away.

Early signs of improvement include:

- More eye contact
- Increased attempts to communicate
- Better tolerance of routines
- Reduced frustration

These are meaningful gains.

Final Thought

You don't need to solve everything at once.

If you:

- Support communication
- Stay consistent
- Start early intervention

—you are doing exactly what your child needs.

Everything else builds from there.