



ATLAS FOUNDATION FOR AUTISM  
252 WEST 29<sup>TH</sup> ST  
NEW YORK, NY 10001

## **Cutting Edge Therapies 2014 NEW EDITION**

**Chapter Title:** Emotional Vocal Exploration: A revolutionary mode of communication

### **Emotional Vocal Exploration (EVE) Mission Statement:**

To empower intellectual and emotional growth in students with complex verbal skill-sets through dynamic choice-making and independent thought. To validate internally motivated and self-initiated responses which expand interests and ideas through conversation and promote the power of voice.

**Disclaimer:** EVE breaks barriers and reforms previously held ideas of what ‘communication’ means. We implore you to delve into this with an open mind and to explore a novel methodology and a new definition of what it means to ‘talk’. Ready yourself for a revolution in *communication*. Read this chapter and fully imagine the real-life sensory experiences described. Walk with us now along the road our children walk every day.

**Warning:** This chapter is laden with emotional content as are the lives of our students. Readers, accept our invitation to understanding and hearing their voices for the first time.

**Thirst:** Imagine it’s a regular day at school: you’ve been sitting in class for hours without a break from your deskwork, listening attentively to your teachers and completing tasks diligently. As your mind wanders away from the papers spread on the desk in front of you, you realize something. You are thirsty. Your mental energy has been so focused on the work, you simply didn’t notice that nagging thirst until now. Your mouth is dry, your throat is scratchy and a nice, cold glass of water sounds like just the thing! You open your mouth to politely request, “Can I have a glass of water?” Nothing. Not a sound comes out. You take a moment and try again. This time, your lips move and an unintelligible noise peeps out, but it is far from what you intended to say. You stop and give yourself a moment to think of the words you were trying to say in hopes that this time around your mouth will do what your brain so urgently wants it to. Yet, not a word passes your chapped lips. Your dry tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth as you try to move all the parts necessary to form the sounds and syllables. The next attempt brings another failure. And then another. This goes on and on...and on. Your internal, mental frustration becomes external, visible. Your brow furrows and your muscles tense. You feel your cheeks flush from both the embarrassment of not being able to say a simple sentence and the frustration of not already having the satisfaction of chugging that enticing glass of water. Your heart rate starts to pick up pace as you strain your body in an attempt to formulate those words. You try to simplify things a bit to see if that helps, maybe one word will be more manageable. “Water,” you think, and then try to say. Nothing. You feel your palms get sweaty and salty beads of perspiration start to form on your forehead. Your facial expression turns to one of scrunched-up exasperation. The teacher in the room sees this and quickly offers you some of your most favorite things: lemonade, soda pop, a snack, a treasured toy; doing whatever they can trying to help you. Your friends and classmates join in to make this a group effort and now everyone around



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you is trying anything they can think of. Yet, it doesn't cross anyone's mind except yours that **you want water**. What do you do? How do you feel?

**Empty Glasses:** With even a miniscule amount of the simplest of molecules, that precious H<sub>2</sub>O, life can form and grow and flourish. As social beings, communication in all its variety can be thought of as our life force, for without the ability to communicate, we become isolated and solitary. If you can imagine the above scenario that highlights one moment of one day existing in that uncomfortable and unnatural isolation from others, perhaps you can go a bit further and conceive of an entire lifetime in that kind of existence. Try and envision what it would be like living in a world void of both simple and complex communicative interactions: a world full of empty glasses. The plethora of ideas sprouting forth inside your mind could not be expressed, no matter how vigorous and creative your efforts to do so may be. Any and all attempts to convey your thoughts in myriad ways fall into an abyss that grows deeper and wider each time you try to speak; engorging the blackness of misunderstanding between you and other people. A social chasm is created; effective communication is broken down. Think of how your experiences would be limited. How your relationships with every single person in your life would be impacted. How your confidence and self-esteem would be deflated. How you might get frustrated and angry after all that hard work and all those failures. How you might just give up entirely, finding yourself alone and parched with no rain clouds overhead or even on the horizon.

Teachers come and go, years pass and still your mouth, tongue and lips feel numb and act as though they are immune or impervious to the neural signals relentlessly sent by your brain. Those electrical signals fail to be interpreted or understood in a way that allows your mouth to form complex movements that, when combined, should form sounds and then words and then sentences. Your body, too works against you, refusing to send signals or communications that are understood by others: your facial expressions belie your true feelings and intentions. This is the life lived day in and day out by a vast majority of those deemed 'non-verbal' or 'less-verbal' who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Apraxia, and Speech and Language difficulties. These are our students, our children and our inspirations. They are the reason Emotional Vocal Exploration (EVE) was created. When we partner together in a new mode of thinking and approaching our children for whom communication seems an insurmountable obstacle, we can lovingly offer them a full glass and help quench their thirst.

**Drink:** Can you imagine what you would *do* and how you would *feel* in that classroom and living in a life-long drought? For us, the answer to that question has come bit by bit and, at times, painfully slowly. With over twenty years combined experience in the field of special education we have traveled a long and arduous road exploring and experimenting with already established yet incomplete approaches, failed methodologies and inadequate ideas. Our previous trials-by-fire turned into some successes for our students that, while substantial and significant, left us educators wanting and needing more in order to help. We yearned for the "best of the best": a single idea or curricula or program that could help *all* of our students achieve without ceiling or limitations. EVE was born out of this desire, countless



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student sessions, research on any and all effective and current methods, piles of academic papers plowed through, specialists observed in action and experts consulted upon and debated with. EVE is the amalgamation of all those years of experiences, numerous failures and subsequently renewed and revised attempts. It is only through the support of our families and the trust and love of our students that we were able to reach this point. While EVE is still in the research phase at the time of this publication, its proof is in the pudding, so to speak: its ability to break barriers of communication motivated us to dedicate this chapter to sharing some of it with you now. We couldn't wait, and neither could our students.

**The Science of Water:** To align the science with the heart, we brought in Amanda Leeder to assist us in this process. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Fordham University's Applied Developmental Psychology program. Before attending Fordham, Amanda received her M.A. in General Psychology at New York University and has six years of experience implementing and researching therapeutic interventions for the ASD population in home and school settings.

Amanda has written the following synopsis to address her experience and understanding of the Emotional Vocal Exploration model, "EVE is a communication approach developed by the co-founders of the Emerge & See Education Center, and designed for individuals on the autistic spectrum with linguistic and social difficulties. The approach prides itself on the high level of respect therapists have for learners, which is inherent in the former's expectation for the latter to be active participants in discussion. These expectations are based on individualized sensory, physical and cognitive profiles of learners that are assessed at the baseline level before therapy begins.

EVE integrates the developmental basis of DIR/Floortime™ and the literacy focus of RPM™ (Rapid Prompt Method), but distinguishes itself according to its focus on teaching people with autism to communicate and advocate for their emotional, physical and intellectual needs and desires through the power of choice. EVE is designed to empower individuals with social and linguistic challenges by encouraging them to choose from a continuous array of topic choices that either switches the conversation topic or delves further into a topic that the learner has previously chosen. The therapist uses the choices of the learner to better direct the conversation, and the expectation is that the learner will utilize the tools afforded to them in order to converse within a topic that motivates them. Choosing topics that are honored by the therapist allows learners to value the utility of language in supporting self-advocacy and learning, thereby becoming active discussion participants."

EVE is a revolutionary use of the basic concept that *all* people are empowered by choice. As Dr. Stanley Greenspan, founder of DIR/Floortime™ stated time and again in his lectures and consultations, "There is no greater feeling than that of being understood!" With that statement ringing in our ears, it became evident that the community needed to understand this method and the doors it opens to building relationships, modifying curriculum and assessing students true knowledge base as well as the expression of their personalities. It is imperative for this program to work for the individual communicating via



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EVE and that they be honored for what they are saying. EVE fundamentally encourages students to speak their mind: students are able to change the topic, to complain, or to say what they need to. We do not shy away from tough topics, emotions or personal interests. Similarly, we do not insert our own beliefs or agendas into the EVE sessions, thus creating a space for mutual trust, respect and honesty.

**The Data Dam:** Handing a single glass to a single student was insufficient to meet our long-term vision of EVE. We believed that from the very beginning we needed to create a veritable reservoir that *all* students of EVE could access. Many highly effective programs could not gain traction due to lack of qualitative studies addressing efficacy and validity. We want to ensure people (parents, teachers, administrators, etc) do not fall to cynicism in deciding whether or not our students are *authentically* sharing their true feelings and answers. We do not want doubt to circumvent celebration and engagement and, thus, from the birth of EVE's mission until now scientific reliability and valid assessment have been key factors in our process. As we actively work and collaborate with a speech therapist and research specialist we have been looking for those outside expert perspectives to inform our practices. Reliable data collection, analysis and reflection are key components not only in the creation of the EVE methodology but also in aiding the progress of our students and the different arenas in which it will be implemented.

The initial research of EVE is currently under way. Its structural concept, execution and ability to help students engage, build confidence and communicate beyond the means of concrete requesting is being closely examined. The study will be used to inform staff development and instructions for caregivers eager to generalize EVE into the student's home and community lives as well. Amanda writes further, "The formative evaluation of EVE will assess the performance of five Emerge & See participants during six EVE sessions spanning over a three month period. Indicators for success are based on whether learner's performances reveal that they know how EVE works, as well as whether the discussion topics presented or chosen are shown to be interesting or useful to the learner. In addition to a quantitative analysis of these indicators for success (listed below), a qualitative analysis of therapists' suggestions/reflections/notes from post-session questionnaires will inform future improvements to EVE in preparation for a wider implementation of the approach."

#### Indicators for Success:

1. Increased number of consecutive back and forth interaction between therapist and learner (therapist offers choices → learner chooses one → therapist offers new choices based on previous selection by learner → learner chooses one)
2. Use (but not abuse) of the 'something else' option
3. Choose paper without needing prompting (though repeated presentation of choices is allowed and encouraged)



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4. Decrease in incidents wherein learner chooses a topic that conflicts with his/her expressed interest in a different topic (picking one piece of paper and saying the words from a different piece of paper, choosing one paper and then protesting against that topic, failing to choose correctly when simple/mastered factual questions are presented)
5. Decrease in tantrums, decrease in aggression, decrease in attempts to leave room during session,
6. Increase in length of sessions
7. Increases in discoveries of newfound interests/abilities of the learner (therapists know the learners very well and for many years)
8. Increase in initiation of topics by verbal participants
9. Increase in therapists' ratings of learner performance during sessions, increase in therapists' ratings of implementation quality
10. More performances perceived by therapist as typical or better than average, compared with those perceived as worse than average

**The Next Stage:** It should be noted that there are particular prerequisites required in order to successfully enter into an EVE program. However, the adaptability and individualized nature of each unique EVE program (each one is slightly different based on each student's profile and skillsets) enables us to overcome smaller obstacles in order to achieve greater results. For instance, a student must have symbolic thinking but they do not need to be a fluent reader (decoding words on a page). Three pieces of paper are laid out in front of you, I touch each one, and as I do I pair a different sound with each piece. You hold these symbols and sounds in your working memory and make your choice by giving me the piece of paper. As I touch the first piece of paper, and say, "A" you mark in your mind that that one is "A". Then, I touch the second one and say "B" and then "C" for the third. This is a simple example of EVE's sequencing and how choices are presented and then selected. Once the options are given, you now know that each piece of paper I touch corresponds to a particular letter or sound. You do not need to be able to read Shakespeare or even know your phonics yet. You simply need to know that each paper relates to a particular sound. Each sound, or in this case letter, can easily be swapped for a longer sound or a word. Once you show that you can give correct responses to concrete questions (i.e. 'hand me 'B'), you are ready to get into the student-directed phase. In this next stage, I present to you the same three pieces of paper and slowly touch each one and present the following three words in succession, "cat", "dog", and "cow", for example. You can then hold in your mind that the three pieces of paper now represent three different animals. Here is where conversation begins. Essentially, we are pairing concrete visuals (pieces of papers) with simple and/or complex sounds (letters and/or words). We are teachers after all, and our job is to teach and



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instruct, so in EVE, we write the word on the paper so that if you are a reader you can also pair the word with the paper visual and the auditory sound, and if you are not a reader yet, you can begin to learn some sight words in that when she touched the first one, that C-A-T combo sounded like that, and slowly the brain starts to put it all together. Conversation typically revolves around personal interests and motivating topics. Instead of demanding that you hand me “cat”, for instance, I *ask* you, “which is your favorite animal?”. Your chosen response is the one *you* want, which then creates an opportunity for us to have a conversation about animals, why you love that animal and maybe I will tell you a story of my experiences with that animal. We talk, we listen and we communicate! Focus and attention, physical readiness and auditory processing abilities are required in order to sit with us and actually hear the instructions, word pairings, etc. This is why the building and assessing of individual student profiles is so vital and crucial to the success of EVE. You cannot put the cart before the communicative horse. We always create an educational program that strengthens the student’s brain-body connections first and *then* implement an EVE program that appropriately fits their individual needs and style.

It is imperative that all parties involved feel encouraged by and trust, respect, and the validity of this communicative system. If the individual implementing the process is skeptical the warmth and significant amount of work the person trying to communicate is exercising becomes negated and the opportunity for a sincere back and forth dialogue is tainted by uncertainty. This process is not one of “right or wrong” answers but a forum for concept exploration, emotional outpouring, and idea development. We are building skyscrapers not knocking down a house of cards!

So now you know there’s water to quench the thirst for communication and respectful conversation. Let’s go over the prescription plan for EVE and if you have questions consult your intuition. Be sure to trust in your child/student/self. Should you need us, we are also here anytime at [info@emergeandsee.net](mailto:info@emergeandsee.net) to answer as best we can!

### **Take as directed...**

#### **Who should take this?**

Individuals with pragmatic language challenges, apraxia, autism, executive functioning difficulties, selective mutism, etc. People eager to communicate with semi-verbal and non-verbal individuals in a respectful and sincere manner that enhances confidence, expansion of ideas, and personal relationships.

#### **What are the side effects?**

Some students may have an emotional response to their own success in communicating and being truly heard outside of basic requests and gestures. Often times there is a cathartic response to the liberation brought about by being aware of their own thinking and ability to be held accountable and to hold others accountable as well. Students will explore their own creative and multi-modal thinking and begin responding to both personal and learning based/academic questions on a regular basis, thus aiding them in creating stronger relationships with their peers, educators, therapists, and families.



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### **Interactions**

EVE can be implemented in conjunction with any and all modalities of effective educational and behavioral therapies. Albeit, during the sessions it is imperative that the interactions be student driven and it is evident the reinforcement for engagement is the EVE process and not token boards, edibles, etc. The relationship is key to the interaction and it is vital that the instructor's affect match the content of the session and is directly connected to the demeanor of the student.

### **Generic alternatives**

EVE has no generic alternative. Emotional Vocal Exploration is a process unique to the individuals brought together either as family, student and teacher, or friends. It is the only process by which choice making, symbolic thinking, and a theory of "no ceiling" are integrated. EVE uniquely allows for trust in intelligence and eventual expansion into writing or actual vocalization of thoughts in a natural structure between equally responsive parties.

### **When to discontinue?**

Never.



*"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"*