



Can You Hear Me?

by Jessie Guest, Program Manager, Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Program

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

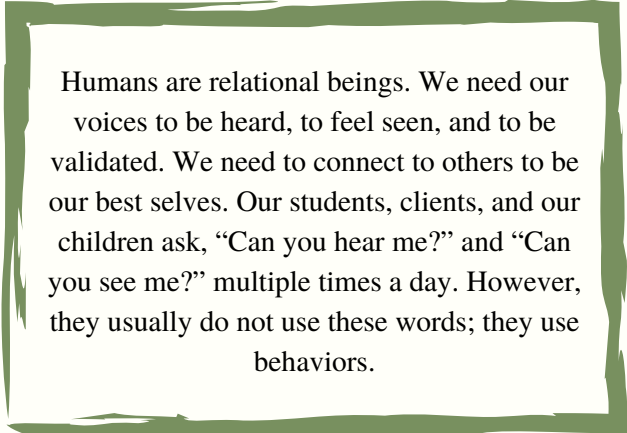
These are the first things we hear as students log in to their virtual classrooms, clients log in for virtual telehealth counseling sessions, or our colleagues log in to virtual meetings. Due to the pandemic, many of our interactions with others now take place in a virtual space. However, “*Can you hear me? Can you see me?*” are not questions that are unique to the use of virtual platforms.

Humans are relational beings. We need our voices to be heard, to feel seen, and to be validated. We need to connect to others to be our best selves. Our students, clients, and our children ask, “Can you hear me?” and “Can you see me?” multiple times a day. However, they usually do not use these *words*; they use *behaviors*.

I am reminded of the many children I worked with as a full-time professional counselor. One in particular asked “*Can you hear me?*” and “*Can you see me?*” to every adult he encountered.

Jacob was a tall, skinny, five-year-old, African American boy in kindergarten. After a couple of weeks meeting with Jacob in my office, I was asked to observe him in his classroom as his behaviors were escalating. Jacob had transferred to a new school halfway through the first quarter. His teachers described him as loud, aggressive, disrespectful, and a distraction to his classmates. His principal said he was not completing any of his work, his behaviors were erratic and unpredictable, and that she believed he was “psychotic” and in need of medication.

On observation day I enter the back of his classroom and sit in a corner. Jacob was not aware I was coming and did not see me enter the room. I watch Jacob sit calmly and quietly at his desk in the back row with a piece of writing paper and pencil. He is watching his teacher explain to the class that they are practicing writing their names. She instructs the class to begin practicing and says she will stop them in about five minutes to move on to the next writing activity.




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Jacob begins writing his name. After a few marks, he lets out a small huff and starts erasing. He begins writing again and very soon after, erasing...again. He continues with the process of writing and erasing, writing and erasing, writing and erasing, for the entire five minutes. Each time he stops, he lets out a small huff or pounds his fist on the desk in frustration. After the five minutes are up, his teacher asks the students to stop and take a seat on the floor in front of the chalkboard to transition to the next activity. Jacob, (without raising his hand) says, “I’m not finished with my name.” His teacher responds, “You had plenty of time to write your name. You shouldn’t have wasted your time.” Jacob replies, “I kept messing up. I need more time.” His teacher asks him to join the rest of the class on the floor. Jacob gets angry, rips his paper, and storms to the other side of the room where he sits on the floor away from the other children. He says he is going to read instead of listen to her “stupid directions.”

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

The teacher continues the lesson and has the children help her spell out words like pumpkin, orange, and Halloween as she writes them on the board. Jacob continues to sit on the floor, removed from the class, book open but upside down. As the teacher works with the class spelling out words, Jacob peeks over the book at the board and follows along, mouthing the letters to himself.



After all three words are on the board, the students return to their seats to copy the words onto their papers. Jacob returns to his seat slowly and with his head down mumbles to the teacher, “I need a new paper.” His teacher responds, “Why did you rip up the other paper?” Jacob replies, “I was mad.” His teacher continues to tell him that he needs to treat his things with respect as well as respect her and then hands him a new paper.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Jacob stares at the board from his seat in the back and gets up to move closer. His teacher asks him to sit down. Jacob explains that he can’t see as he continues to walk to the board. Jacob’s teacher walks over to Jacob and tells him he needs to sit down and if he doesn’t he will get his star moved from yellow to red (it was already moved from green earlier in the day). Jacob throws his paper, kicks the desk in front him, and turns around to walk away.

Then he sees me.

He sits down and begins to cry. I walk over to Jacob and he immediately asks me, “What are you doing here?” I tell him I am here to see him. He stops crying and shows me his cubby. We move to the side of the room and color together. I ask what the other students are doing. He tells me about the writing activity and he says it was “stupid” and he “can’t do it right.” I ask if he wants to do it with me and he says, “Okay.” As Jacob works, he gets frustrated and stops. I provide encouragement, reminders that it is practice and doesn’t need to be perfect, and that I can see he is working hard. He ends up finishing the activity and is excited to show his teacher all the words he has written.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

What I see is a little boy trying to do his work, wanting to do his work, but struggling and getting frustrated.

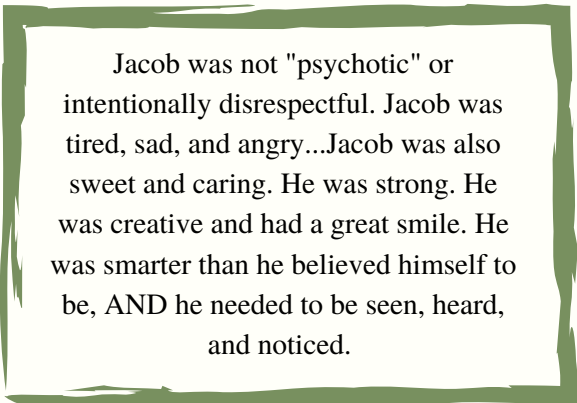
What I hear is a child asking for what he needs with words, body language, and behaviors.

What I see is a child who wants to learn.

What I see is a child paying attention even if it isn’t in the same way as the other students.

What I see is an emotionally drained and frustrated child who struggles with self-esteem.

What I also see is an overwhelmed teacher — a teacher who has many children in her class with individual needs, a teacher that wasn’t listening with her eyes and missed Jacob’s desire to learn, a teacher who is doing the best she can but lacking tools of awareness and an understanding of *how to see* this child.



Jacob was not "psychotic" or intentionally disrespectful. Jacob was tired, sad, and angry...Jacob was also sweet and caring. He was strong. He was creative and had a great smile. He was smarter than he believed himself to be, AND he needed to be seen, heard, and noticed.

Jacob transferred to the school in October because his mother was unable to care for him and his siblings. Jacob’s mother brought her children to the Department of Social Services while she attempted to find a better job and housing for their family. Jacob was separated from all his siblings and moved to three different foster homes in less than two months. Jacob witnessed domestic violence, neglect, and abuse from his mother’s previous boyfriends from a young age.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Jacob was not "psychotic" or intentionally disrespectful. Jacob was tired, sad, and angry. He missed his siblings and his mother. He was adjusting to being in school for the first time. He lacked consistency. Jacob was also sweet and caring. He was strong. He was creative and had a great smile. He was smarter than he believed himself to be, AND he needed to be seen, heard, and noticed.

As a professional counselor and a counselor educator, I have learned, (and continue to learn), to listen with my eyes and not just my ears. I try to see what the child is communicating through their behaviors or actions. Is the child acting out in class truly angry at his classmate for knocking his elbow as he is writing or is he tired and irritable because

he doesn't sleep well at his dad's new house? Is the child that can't sit still, intentionally not focusing on the teacher's lesson *or* is she anxious or scared due to living in a home with domestic violence?

As the Program Manager for the Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency at the University of South Carolina, I was unsure how my professional background would be helpful in a teacher education program. However, I quickly saw the need and the desire of our teaching residents to connect with their students and attend to their students through a more holistic lens. The residents were bursting with passion to help the children in their classes and eager to build a sense of community in their own classrooms. To answer this need my colleagues and I created a social-emotional learning professional development series throughout their time in the program. The focus of the social-emotional learning series is twofold. First, the residents are learning to understand their own social-emotional needs. By better understanding their own social emotional needs, they are better able to understand their reactions to students, increase empathy and patience, and enhance curiosity about their students. Second, the residents are learning how to facilitate social emotional learning in their own classrooms. The residents are learning to see the impact of getting to know their students — *to see their students with more than their eyes.*

Although it is not the teacher's job or focus to provide counsel to students, teachers are on the front lines. Teachers are the ones that know the pulse of the school and student body. During the school year, teachers are the adults that interact with children the most. If aware, teachers have the power to notice subtle and overt changes in students and connect them to those who can help. Teachers are more than educational tools or vessels of knowledge; they are the eyes, ears, and voice of our youth. AND they need tools to help them see, hear, and advocate for our children.

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“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

All eyes to the front of the room, please.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Please stop fidgeting with your pencil.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Please keep your head up and not on your desk.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

That's not the way we speak to our classmates. Please apologize for being rude.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

“Can you see that I am nervous? Stressed? Tired? Hungry?”

“Do you know the things I am responsible for at home? That I want to be here, and I like your class? That I want to learn? That I have many strengths and not just needs?”

“Hear me.”

“See me.”

“Know me.”



Jessie Guest received her Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision from the University of South Carolina (UofSC). Jessie is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, teaches graduate courses in the Counselor Education Program at UofSC, and is the Program Manager of the Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Program focused on teacher preparation and retention in rural counties throughout South Carolina.