Student Handout

THE SECRET LANGUAGE

You probably know that people talk to other people with words. But have you ever noticed that people also "talk" with their faces (especially their eyes), their bodies, and their tone of voice? This type of talk is like a *secret language*. In this language, people give important messages with the expressions on their faces, the ways they hold or move their bodies, and the way their voices sound. Believe it or not, these messages are just as important as the words we use when we talk! In fact, we can totally change the meaning of words just by changing our tone of voice, the way we hold our body, or the expression on our face as we speak. For example, consider the following story:

There once was a boy named Peter who had a big sister named Jane, a lazy cat named Hairball, and a fat dog named Toothpick. Peter and Jane loved to eat fish and chips. They were thrilled one day when Mom decided to prepare her delicious, homemade fish and chips for dinner. That evening, Peter and Jane were helping to put dinner on the table, when Peter accidentally stumbled over Hairball, who was lying in the middle of the kitchen floor. Unfortunately, Peter was carrying the platter of fish and chips, which went flying across the room, landing squarely in front of Toothpick. In a flash Toothpick gobbled up all of the tasty fish and chips, leaving none for the family's dinner. At this, Jane looked over at Peter and said, "Good job, Peter!"

Did Peter think that Jane was complimenting him for tripping and letting Toothpick eat the fish and chips? The answer is no! Peter knew right away that Jane was really upset, and that her words actually meant "bad job," not "good job." How did Peter know this? Well, first of all, Peter heard Jane's angry and sarcastic tone of voice and saw her clenched fists, scrunched up eyebrows, and down-turned mouth.   **(continued)**

These were *nonverbal* clues that Jane was angry. Peter also knew that Jane loved fish and chips and therefore would be upset to lose her dinner. This was a *contextual clue* that helped Peter figure out that Jane probably was upset over losing her chance to eat Mom's fish and chips.

Some people seem to understand these types of clues easily. Other people need help to understand them. But one thing is for sure – a person needs to know how to figure out these clues in order to make sense of other people's words and actions. As a matter of fact, some people who have trouble doing this say that they feel like they live on another planet where everyone around them speaks a strange, secret language with their eyes and bodies, and that they understand only half of what these strange beings are trying to say!

If you have ever felt this way, help is on the way. This program will help you understand *how* people's facial expressions and body language can change the meaning of their words. You will get lots of practice using facial expression and body language "clues" to help figure out what other people may be feeling and thinking. This will help you learn to predict how other people might react to your words and actions, and what they are going to do next. If this sounds like it might be helpful, then it's time to get started on this program! Have fun!

Figure 8a. A copy of the Student Handout "The Secret Language." Program 8, Recognizing Nonverbal and Contextual Clues in Other People.