

9-12 Years: The Questions That Keep You Awake

A practical guide from Hulya Mehmet, Consultant Speech & Language Therapist

What No One Prepares You For

"Will she ever live independently?" "What happens when I'm gone?" "Is he lonely?" "Does she know she's different?"

These are the 3am questions. The ones you can't ask at school reviews. The ones that make your chest tight.

I've sat with parents asking these questions for 25 years. Your 9-year-old who still doesn't speak is becoming a pre-teen. Everything feels more urgent now.

Let me share what I've learned from hundreds of families navigating these years.

Your Pre-Teen Today

What I See in My Clinic

Ahmed, 10: Types full sentences on his iPad. Won't speak a word. Writes poetry about feeling trapped in silence.

Sophie, 11: Says 20 words to family. Silent at school. Her AAC device has 3,000+ words programmed. She uses them all.

Marcus, 9: Echolalia only. But yesterday typed: "I understand everything. I just can't make my mouth work."

Every child different. Every child complete.

The Hidden Development

Your child's inner world is rich. Richer than you might know:

- They understand adult conversations
- They have complex thoughts about their difference

- They feel the weight of your worry
- They dream about their future
- They wonder about love and friendship
- They know. They know.

The New Challenges at This Age

What hits hardest:

- Friends talking about crushes (communication barrier magnified)
 - Group projects requiring quick verbal exchange
 - The move to secondary school looming
 - Body changes they can't discuss easily
 - Seeing younger children surpass their speech
 - The growing gap between understanding and expression
-

"Who Am I?" (The Question They Can't Ask)

Inside Your Child's Mind

A 12-year-old typed this in my office last month: "Everyone talks about when I grow up. But will I grow up? Or will I always be the kid who can't talk?"

I cried. His mum cried. Then we got to work.

Building Identity When Different

Show them they're not alone:

I keep a book of successful AAC users:

- Tim, university lecturer (types lectures)
- Sarah, graphic designer (communicates through art)
- David, software developer (codes better than speaks)
- Maya, autism advocate (presents using AAC)

Your child needs to see: Different futures exist.

What Actually Helps

Start conversations (yes, really): "I notice you've been quiet lately. Want to type/draw/show me what you're thinking?"

Find their superpower:

- Maybe they notice everything
- Maybe they're incredibly logical
- Maybe they're deeply empathetic
- Maybe they're visually gifted
- Maybe they're musically talented

One child's superpower? He could spot a lie instantly. No words needed. Just knew.

Create an identity board:

- Pictures of interests
- Photos of achievements
- Quotes they relate to
- Future dreams (however communicated)
- People like them succeeding

Update it together monthly. Watch identity grow.

Secondary School Is Coming (Don't Panic)

The Reality Check

Year 6 teacher: "How will she cope with 10 different teachers?" You: *internal screaming*

I get it. The thought of secondary school keeps you awake. Let me help.

Transition Planning That Works

Year 5 - Start early:

- Visit potential schools (quiet times)
- Meet the SENCO (interview THEM)
- Film walk-through of building
- Identify quiet spaces
- Find one ally teacher

The questions I tell parents to ask: "How do you support non-speaking students?" "Can we have the timetable in advance?" "Is there a quiet lunch option?" "Who would be their key person?" "Can they visit weekly in Year 6?"

Academic Adaptations That Actually Work

English: Forget verbal presentations. One girl I work with creates YouTube videos. Records at home. Plays in class. Genius.

Science: Pair with same lab partner all year. They do the talking. Your child does the recording. Both learn.

Languages: Fight me on this - AAC in French is still French. Written responses are valid. Verbal testing is discrimination.

PE: One boy became the team's tactical advisor. Used his iPad to show plays. Never spoke. Valued member.

The Secret Weapon

Lunch pass to the library.

Seriously. This saves mental health. Quiet space. Same kids. Books. Computers. No playground politics.

One mum told me: "That lunch pass changed everything."

The Friend Thing (It's Complicated)

What's Really Happening

"She had a friend in Year 3. Now she eats alone."

Pre-teen friendships need chat. Gossip. Quick banter. Your child might have deep thoughts but can't do verbal ping-pong.

It hurts. Them and you.

Different Kinds of Connection

What I've seen work:

Gaming friends: Minecraft server with three boys. They build. No talking needed. True friendship.

Interest twins: Two girls who love anime. Watch together. Draw fan art. Text emoji conversations. Beautiful.

Younger friends: Don't discourage this. A 10-year-old with 7-year-old friends is still a 10-year-old with friends.

Adult mentors: The teaching assistant who gets them. The librarian who saves books. These relationships matter.

Online Connections (Yes, Really)

"But screen time!" "But safety!"

Listen. For many non-speaking pre-teens, online IS their social life:

- Discord servers about interests
- Roblox with real-life friends
- YouTube comments on special interest videos
- Carefully monitored but real connections

One 11-year-old told me: "Online, I'm just Alex. Not 'the kid who doesn't talk.'"

When It's Bullying

The subtle cruelty of this age:

- "Talk" demands when they know child can't
- Hiding AAC devices
- Excluding from group chats
- Recording meltdowns
- "Retard" starts appearing
- Physical intimidation increases

What works:

- Name it: "That's bullying. It's not okay."
- Document everything (screenshots, dates)
- Skip teacher, go to SENCO
- Consider police if physical
- Build child's support network
- Sometimes: change schools

Your child cannot advocate against bullies. You must.

The Body Talk (Without Talking)

Starting the Conversation They Can't

A mum asked me: "How do I explain periods when she can't ask questions?"

Another: "He's getting erections. He's confused. How do I help?"

These conversations are hard with talking kids. Harder with ours. But essential.

Visual Supports That Actually Help

The Puberty Book (Make Your Own):

1. Photos of your child at different ages
2. Simple drawings of body changes
3. Timeline: "Age 10... Age 11... Age 12"
4. What's normal, what's not
5. Private vs public behaviour
6. Who to tell about body questions

Communication Cards for Privacy:

- "I need the bathroom alone"
- "Please knock"
- "I need mum/dad"
- "Something hurts here" (body diagram)
- "I don't understand"
- "Too much information"

Practical Preparations

For periods:

- Visual calendar tracking
- Picture sequence for pad changing
- Comfort kit ready (heat pad, chocolate)
- School nurse briefed
- Spare supplies everywhere
- Pain communication cards

For all bodies:

- Deodorant routine (visual schedule)
- Private time respected

- Clothing choices honoured
- Sensory needs considered
- Doctor visits prepared for
- Questions welcomed (any format)

The Sensory Storm

Puberty is sensory hell:

- Hormones affect sensory processing
- New smells (theirs and others')
- Texture issues with developing bodies
- Emotional regulation goes haywire
- Sleep patterns chaos
- Appetite swings

One parent: "It's like early years all over again, but with hormones."

Yep. That's exactly what it is.

Supporting Mental Health (Because It Matters)

Why I'm Sharing This

Many non-speaking young people experience mental health challenges during pre-teen years. This isn't inevitable - it's often because their needs aren't understood or met.

When we know what to watch for and how to help, we can make an enormous difference. Your awareness and support are your child's best protection.

What Depression Looks Like Without Words

Jamie's mum noticed:

- Stopped using AAC device
- Slept constantly
- No interest in Minecraft (obsession for years)
- Eating stopped
- Eye contact gone
- Scratching arms raw

She thought: "Bad phase."

Reality: Major depression.

Getting Mental Health Help

The script that works: "My child is non-speaking but communicates through [method]. They're showing signs of depression/anxiety. We need CAMHS assessment adapted for their communication needs."

What to document:

- Behaviour changes (specific)
- Sleep patterns
- Eating changes
- Self-harm (photos if needed)
- Communication reduction
- Interest loss

Therapy adaptations that work:

- Art therapy
- Music therapy
- Animal-assisted therapy
- Modified CBT using visuals
- Family therapy
- Medication when needed

Building Protection

Daily check-ins: "Show me how today was" - Use emotion cards, colour scales, thumbs up/down

Multiple outlets:

- Journal (written/drawn/typed)
- Voice recordings when alone
- Physical exercise
- Creative expression
- Safe person to "talk" to

One child types me weekly emails. Never mentions them in person. Lifeline.

Technology (Their Lifeline, Your Nightmare)

The Reality

"She's always on her phone!" "He won't get off YouTube!"

I hear you. But consider: Technology might be the only place your child feels equal.

Digital Safety for Vulnerable Kids

The frank talk: Your child is more vulnerable online because:

- They might not recognize manipulation
- They're desperate for connection
- They can't easily report problems
- Predators target different kids

Safety that works:

- Parental controls ARE okay at this age
- Check devices weekly (openly, not secretly)
- Friend their accounts
- Know their passwords
- Teach "safe strangers" online
- Practice "what if" scenarios

The conversation: "You can talk to people about Pokémon. You can't share photos, location, or personal details. If someone asks, show me."

Building Life Skills Through Tech

What I love seeing:

- Cooking videos → Making sandwiches
- YouTube tutorials → New skills
- Calendar apps → Independence
- Money apps → Maths practice
- GPS apps → Community navigation
- Alexa/Siri → Daily support

One teen's setup:

- Morning routine on Alexa
- Visual schedule on phone
- Banking app with parental controls

- Uber account for emergencies
- Medical info in phone
- Family GPS tracker

Independence building, safely.

Screen Time Reality

My rule: Purpose over time

- AAC device = unlimited
- School work = as needed
- Social connection = monitored but generous
- Special interests = negotiated
- Mindless scrolling = limited
- Before bed = never

One family: 2 hours YouTube (interests) = 30 minutes chores. Works.

"What Will They Do When They Grow Up?"

Let's Get Real About the Future

A dad asked me: "Should I save for university or residential care?"

I said: "Yes."

Because we don't know. But we plan for possibilities, not limitations.

Careers for Non-Speaking People (They Exist!)

Real people I know:

- David: Software tester (finds bugs others miss)
- Sarah: Digital artist (sells work online)
- Marcus: Data analyst (patterns are his language)
- Emma: Animal care assistant (dogs don't need words)
- Tom: Library assistant (quiet job, perfect)
- Lucy: Social media manager (types brilliantly)

Start noticing:

- What do they love?

- What comes easily?
- What problems do they solve?
- What do others ask their help with?
- When are they happiest?

Building Work Skills Now

Age 9-12 practice:

- Daily responsibilities (feeding pets)
- Time management (visual schedules)
- Following instructions (recipe cards)
- Problem-solving (escape rooms!)
- Computer skills (everything)
- Money basics (shop with support)

One family's genius move: "Business" making birthday cards. Child designs on iPad. Sells to family. Learns: creation, pricing, customer service, money handling. All without speaking.

The Transition Talk

Start these conversations:

- "What interests you about grown-up life?"
- "What kind of place would you like to live?"
- "What help might you need?"
- "What could you teach others?"

Use visuals. Take time. Their answers might surprise you.

One 11-year-old typed: "I want to live alone with cats and make apps."

Brilliant. Let's work toward that.

And What About You?

The Questions You're Really Asking

"Will I be caring for them forever?" "What happens when I die?" "Did I do enough?" "Should I have tried harder?" "Will they be okay?"

I see you. Up in the middle of the night googling adult services. Crying in the car after school meetings. Pretending everything's fine.

The Grief That Resurfaces

Pre-teen years bring new grief:

- Other kids going to sleepovers
- Talk of SATs and secondary schools
- Birthday parties they're not invited to
- Conversations about futures
- The widening gap

One mum: "I thought I'd dealt with it. Then Year 6 parents evening broke me."

What Actually Helps Parents

Find one parent who gets it: Not the "all kids develop differently" parent. The one whose kid also doesn't speak. The one who cries too.

Plan without limiting:

- Research supported living
- Look at specialist colleges
- Investigate adult services
- Build circle of support
- BUT ALSO research universities
- Look at employment support
- Dream bigger than feels safe

Get therapy: Seriously. You're traumatised. From years of fighting. From constant worry. From system battles.

You need someone to tell: "I'm scared."

The Permission Slip

You're allowed to:

- Feel exhausted
- Want a different life sometimes
- Grieve milestones
- Be angry at the universe
- Take breaks
- Not be grateful all the time
- Dream of their independence
- Fear their dependence
- Love them and struggle

- All of it. All at once.

A Letter to Your Pre-Teen

(Because I Know You Wonder What You'd Say)

Dear You,

I see you rolling your eyes when I talk about "when you were little." You're not little anymore. You're changing. Growing. Becoming.

I know it's hard when friends chat easily and words stick in your throat. I know you understand everything - the jokes, the meanness, the possibilities, the limits.

I see you trying. Every day. In ways others don't notice.

Your different isn't less. Your quiet isn't empty. Your struggle isn't failure.

You have thoughts I wish I could hear. Dreams I want to know. Jokes that would make me laugh. Worries I could help carry.

Even without words, I know you.

Your future exists. Different than I imagined when you were born. But YOURS.

You belong in this world exactly as you are.

And I will fight for your place in it until my last breath.

Love, The parent who's still learning

My Final Thought

I met a non-speaking 30-year-old last year. He typed:

"Tell parents of pre-teens: The hardest years are 11-14. Everything hurts. You don't fit anywhere. You understand too much. But it gets better. I promise. Find your people. Use your difference. Build your life. It's possible."

He lives independently. Works in IT. Has a girlfriend. Still doesn't speak.

Your pre-teen's journey won't be typical. But it's theirs. And that makes it perfect.

Hulya Mehmet
Consultant Speech & Language Therapist
Believer in different futures

P.S. Save this guide. When they're 25 and living their life their way, you'll want to remember how impossible it all seemed at 11.