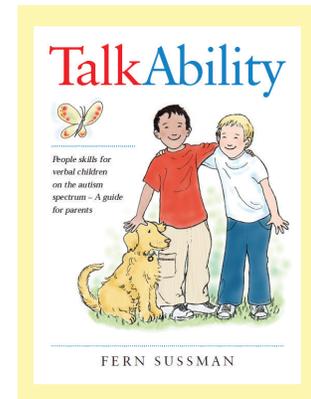


The Research Base for TalkAbility™ – The Hanen Program® for Parents of Autistic Children Who Are Speaking in Sentences and Having Conversations

In the *TalkAbility* program, parents learn how to support their young autistic child to:

- participate in more extended back and forth conversations
- understand what people say without words in a conversation
- understand how other people feel and identify ways they could respond
- explore new play skills and strengthen their friendship skills



Theory of mind and social communication

Like all Hanen programs, *TalkAbility* is based on principles that are consistent with best practice recommendations: involving parents as early as possible in their child's intervention program and facilitating communication in naturalistic contexts. And, like all Hanen Programs, *TalkAbility*'s content draws from the research on what helps autistic children develop their understanding of social situations and the different ways they can navigate them, especially in the area of empathy and perspective-taking. The literature uses the term, "theory of mind" to describe this ability to understand what someone else thinks or feels. In the *TalkAbility* program, parents learn to think about theory of mind as "tuning in" to others and develop their ability to tune into their child's interests and perspectives.

Research on what helps children develop "theory of mind" is built into TalkAbility™

There is an abundance of research that shows that "parent talk" is crucial to the young child's development of a theory-of-mind or tuning in (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2014; Kimhi, 2014). For instance, children whose parents talk to them about desires, especially contrasting the *differences* among what people desire, subsequently have a better understanding of how others feel and think. So, even something as simple as discussing the different cereals that each family member likes can help children develop perspective-taking. This research is reflected in what parents learn in the *TalkAbility* program as they learn to use the kind of talk that is known to foster the child's development of "theory of mind".

There are various reasons why autistic children are not exposed to mental state language in conversations (e.g. "thinks", "knows" and "remembers"). *TalkAbility* helps parents choose specific tuning-in vocabulary words that their children need to hear and helps them incorporate these words into their everyday conversations with their children.

Research on using a child's emerging language skill to develop and cement concepts

Parental input is only part of what helps children tune into the thoughts of others. Once children have the language that enables them to discuss what's going on in someone else's mind, with words like "they think," or "they know," they are better equipped to understand social situations. Children often need language to enable them to develop concepts. So, when children acquire the ability to formulate sentences that include mental state verbs (think, feel) (for example, "He *thinks that* he's the best player"), they have a way to imagine other people's thoughts as well as talk about them.

In the *TalkAbility* program, parents are encouraged to listen for when their child uses phrases like, “I *think* so,” and “I don’t *know*” so they can pick up on them and use more of this kind of language themselves, giving their children even more models of abstract language from which to learn.

TalkAbility helps parents know what the next step is by identifying the child’s current stage in understanding social situations and perspective taking.

Stage 1 understanding wanting: when children understand that people want different things;

Stage 2 understanding thinking: when children understand that people think differently;

Stage 3 understanding that seeing leads to knowing: when children understand that seeing something themselves doesn’t mean another person can see the same thing;

Stage 4 understanding hidden feelings: when children understand that what we say or how we look isn’t always the way we feel inside, and;

Stage 5 understanding false beliefs: when children understand that people can sometimes think things are true when they’re not.

The *TalkAbility* approach involves parents in their child’s intervention and facilitates communication in naturalistic contexts. *TalkAbility* does more than help parents support their child’s understanding of social situations – it also supports parents to better understand their child’s perspective. In this way, empathy learning is a “two-way street” in which parent and child grow together while connecting and having fun.

References

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Helping You Help Children Communicate

The Hanen Centre is a not-for-profit charitable organization devoted to helping parents become their child’s most important language teacher. We train speech-language pathologists to engage, support and coach parents and educators to develop the skills to effectively foster young children’s early language, social communication and literacy development within natural everyday activities. This includes children with or at risk of language delays, young autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.

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