



## Parents as Partners: Collaborating with Parents Is Better for Children's Language Development

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Research shows that, when we work with preschool children who have language delays or disorders, **parents play an essential role in intervention**. When parents are coached to use language facilitation strategies, their child's language gains are more significant and lasting. This is true for all children with language disorders, including those on the autism spectrum or with developmental delays.

As a speech-language pathologist (SLP), your clinical work will be most effective if you involve children's parents right from the beginning. This means including parents at all stages of the intervention process, such as:

- Assessment
- Goal-setting
- Planning
- Intervention

When parents feel that they are partners in the intervention, you establish a **collaboration**.

## Collaboration has two parts:

- **Developing a supportive relationship**
  - Parents bring their own perspectives and values to intervention. You can develop a supportive relationship by opening up communication in a respectful way.
  - When you listen and show empathy, you gain a better understanding of the parents' perspectives, helping to individualize your approach to their child's intervention.
- **Ensuring the parents' participation**
  - Directly involving parents in intervention includes coaching them to apply language facilitation strategies in activities and routines with their child.
  - The goal of coaching is to help parents learn to support their child's communication throughout the day. Current best-practice recommendations should inform your coaching.

**Each child's strengths, interests, and needs will always remain at the heart of your sessions, but** collaborating with parents leads to better outcomes for everyone involved in the intervention process:

- **Children benefit** when parents consistently apply language intervention strategies in everyday interactions. Children's language skills are more likely to improve when they engage with the adults who are most important in their lives in motivating daily activities and routines.
- **Parents benefit** because they are more motivated to apply strategies when they feel empowered to improve their children's communication themselves. A supportive therapeutic relationship is conducive to parents' learning and "buy in." Parents consistently rate intervention highly when it involves being coached to use responsive interaction strategies during everyday interactions with their child.
- **You benefit** by facilitating more significant improvements for the children on your caseload efficiently. In this role, you become a coach rather than being the "expert" therapist working with the child. Your skills in providing best-practice coaching that is also family-centred will increase the more you collaborate with parents. Shifting your role to supporting child-parent interactions can also free you up to make key observations about each child's progress and reflect on sessions objectively.

## Five Practical Steps for Collaborating Effectively with Parents

As an SLP student or recent graduate, you may feel uncertain about how to involve parents in intervention. Similarly, parents are often busy, stressed, or expecting you to take the lead.

For these reasons, it may be tempting to keep parents at a distance while you focus on the child. However, because interactions with their parents in everyday activities and routines are the best opportunities for children to learn language, **collaborating with parents is an essential part of providing effective early language intervention.**

Collaborating with parents changes what you do as an SLP. Instead of instructing, you are coaching with guidance and suggestions. Parents learn from and respond to coaching in different ways. Here are **five practical steps** you can follow to help you collaborate effectively with parents.

### **STEP 1: Get to Know the Family & Set Expectations**

*Your goal: Begin to develop the relationship with parents and encourage them to start participating.*

- Consider each family's **social profile**. The linguistic, cultural, and health backgrounds of each child and their parents should always inform your coaching.
- Discuss **expectations for the parents' participation** and why it is important for their child's language development. Highlight the child's role, the parents' roles, and your role in the intervention.
- Observe the parents and child interacting. **Together with the parents, set appropriate communication goals.**
- Determine the parents' strengths and interaction style so you can adjust your coaching to their needs. ([Hanan workshops](#) train SLPs to identify parent interaction styles and stages of learning.)

### **STEP 2: Start Your Sessions the Same Way**

*Your goal: Keep the positive relationship with parents so they continue participating.*

- Make time at the beginning of each session for parents to discuss their child's progress, and to voice their concerns without judgement. Research shows **parents are more likely to buy in to the coaching process when given the time to talk through anxieties.**
- Respond with warmth and encourage parents to share their thoughts.

### **STEP 3: Preview What Parents Will Be Doing Today**

*Your goal: Help the parent understand why and how new concepts fit with their child's needs.*

- Ask whether they had a chance to use strategies with their child since the last session.
- Review strategies the parents learned in previous sessions.
- Introduce a new strategy, if the parent is ready. Explain how the strategy works and why it is important for their child. Provide a demonstration of what the strategy looks like when used during an interaction with the child.

- **Connect the child's goals** to new strategies and information. For example, you might say, "One of the goals we set for your child is to take first turns in an interaction. When we use this strategy, we are giving her more chances to take those first turns."
- Give parents an opportunity to show their understanding of information and strategies, and to ask questions.

#### STEP 4: Coach the Parents to Practise

*Your goal: Give an opportunity for parents to put the ideas they have just learned into action.*

- Confirm the parents are ready to try the strategies.
- Have parents try using the strategies as they interact with their child.
- **Coach parents to practise with their child!** Offer suggestions if parents are not using the strategies with their child.
- Keep the parents focused on applying the strategies successfully so that they see an example of the positive effect on their child's communication.

#### STEP 5: Review the Session

*Your goal: Give parents time to reflect on what they learned.*

- Ask parents to share their thoughts about the session. **Draw the parents' attention to moments when their use of strategies had a positive effect on their child.**
- Guide parents to notice how changes in their own behaviour helped to reach their child's goal.
- Give a chance for parents to discuss any concerns or questions as you wrap up the session.
- **Think about how the parent and child progressed in their learning** and what you might support through coaching at the next session.

#### To Sum Up

Developing a positive relationship while encouraging parents to practise will help you to become a more effective coach. Research shows that **following a process like the five steps above is the best way to ensure parents acquire and master skills** needed to support their child's language skills.

Partnering with parents is the foundation of the **Hanen approach**. *Hanen workshops like [It Takes Two to Talk®](#) or [More Than Words®](#) offer evidence-based* frameworks and high-quality training to **help you build collaboration with parents**.

Becoming certified in a Hanen program is like **receiving a toolbox with everything you need** to involve parents in your sessions. You will learn how to:

- Apply principles of adult education to support and coach parents
- Assess children with language delays/disorders
- Assess child-parent interactions
- Work with parents to set realistic communication goals
- Lead Hanen Programs
- Teach language strategies with individual clients or in Hanen Programs for groups of parents

## References

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## About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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