



Was That Intentional? Helping Young Children with Communication Delays Send Purposeful Messages

By Lauren Lowry

Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

To do something “intentionally” means to do it on purpose. And for children at the beginning stages of communication, a big developmental step happens when they learn to send **intentional** messages.

“Intentionality” refers to a child’s ability to send messages on purpose, directly to someone to achieve a specific goal

In the early stages of communication development, infants and young children with developmental delays communicate without realizing it. It’s the adult who attributes meaning to what the child does. The child might make sounds, look at items they want, or use body movements or facial expressions to indicate their wants and needs. But they do not send these messages directly to someone by looking at them or connecting with them.

Behaviour that <i>is not</i> intentional	Intentional behaviour
Child looks at cookies on a table and makes a sound, then looks	Child looks at cookies, makes a sound, then looks at mom
Child smiles when she sees her favourite musical toy	Child smiles, then gives her favourite toy to dad so that he can turn it on

Once children make the connection that they have to send messages directly to another person in order to achieve their “goal” or purpose, communication can really take off!

It can be very difficult to understand a child’s messages when they are subtle and not directed towards someone. But research has shown that caregivers’ ability to respond to their child’s subtle behaviour is a very reliable way to develop intentional communication [1].

When parents respond to their child’s sounds, facial expressions and body movements, it helps the child make the connection that his behaviour has meaning to other people.

Cynthia Cress, a researcher from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, works with young children and their families. Cress and her colleagues recently studied 20 children with severe expressive language delays who were just beginning to send intentional messages [2]. They wanted to see how these children and their parents played together and what factors influenced their ability to respond to each other. They noticed that:

- **parents responded more often to their child’s nonvocal behaviours (gestures, body movements, facial expression) than to their sounds.** Cress and her colleagues suspected that the meaning behind the children’s sounds must have been less clear and more difficult to interpret than their nonvocal behaviours.
- **it was easier for parents to respond when their child sent messages directly to them (intentional messages)**
- **children responded more to parents during activities that had a clear purpose,** like snack time (get and eat the food), playing with a motivating toy (see/hear the toy do something), or playing a social game like bouncing on Daddy’s knee (get bounced up and down). Activities with clear goals encourage children to send messages to achieve the goal. And because the goal is clear, it makes it easier for parents to figure out what the child wants.

Cress and her colleagues recommend parent training such as Hanen programs that help parents promote their child’s intentional communication [2]

Parents know their child best, so they are in the best position to become their child's "interpreter". When parents learn ways to identify and respond to all of their child's subtle signals and messages, they can help their child develop intentional communication.

How You Can Help Your Child Send Intentional Messages

- **Become a message detective!** By carefully noticing what your child is doing, you can start to keep track of the ways he or she sends messages. You can do this by:
 - **Observing your child** – notice your child's face, actions, and focus/interest
 - **Listening to your child** – notice your child's sounds and the situations during which he or she made those sounds

You can keep a running list of your child's actions and sounds and what you think they mean. This will help you know how to respond appropriately.

- **Be face-to-face with your child.** In order for your child to direct a message to you, you need to be close by and facing him so he can see your face. This will let your child know that you are part of the interaction, and it will also make it easier for him to look in your direction when he's ready.
- **Be your child's interpreter.** Once you've figured out all the subtle ways your child may be trying to send messages, you can "interpret" these messages by saying and doing something that matches the meaning behind his message. This will help your child make the connection that his behaviour has meaning to other people. Keep your interpretation short and simple.

Interpret your child's messages	
<u>What the child does</u>	<u>How the parent can interpret</u>
Looks at cookies on the table & makes a sound	Says "Mmmm...cookies!" or "You want a cookie" and gives child a cookie
Smiles when she sees and hears her favourite musical toy	Holds up the musical toy and says "You like the music" or "Nice music!"

- **Use motivating activities that have a clear goal.** Activities that have a clear goal for your child - such as snack, social games like bouncing on daddy's knee, or playing with a motivating toy - encourage your child to send messages to achieve the desired outcome. Besides having a clear goal, these activities also involve two

people. This encourages interaction and provides opportunities for your child to direct a message to you.

Examples of activities with clear goals	
<u>Activity</u>	<u>Goal</u>
blowing bubbles	watching/catching bubbles
playing with a wind-up toy	seeing the wind-up toy move
snack	tasting the food
tickles	receiving a tickle

- **Create opportunities for your child to send you a message during activities with clear goals.** By pausing and waiting at a predictable moment during these activities, you can provide your child with a chance to direct a message to you. This might mean waiting before you bounce your child on your knee to see if he wants to do it again, waiting before you give your child a second helping of crackers, or waiting before winding up his favourite wind-up toy.

When you wait, look at your child and lean in close so he knows you are expecting him to do something. When he does something, no matter how subtle, acknowledge this by continuing the interaction (give some crackers, give a tickle, wind up the toy). Say something that matches his message. Be sure to follow your child's lead – use activities that your child likes, and stop when he loses interest.

By becoming a keen observer of your child's subtle signals, and responding to the meaning of these signals, you will help your child make the connection that his signals have meaning and he can direct them to people. In this way, he will be on the road to intentionality.

References

1. Cress, C. (2014, March 24). *Promoting Intentional Communication in Very Early Communicators: Matching Strategies to Potential Sources of Difficulty*. Power point slides and presentation given at the Hanen Centre, Toronto: Ontario.
2. Cress, C. J., Grabast, J. & Burgers Jerke, K. (2013). Contingent Interactions Between Parents and Young Children with Severe Expressive Communication Impairments. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 34(2), 81-96.

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.

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