

# What Do Families Think About the Online More Than Words® Program?

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The More Than Words® program helps parents of autistic children and children with social communication needs support their child's ability to communicate and interact during their everyday activities. Up until a few years ago, the *More Than Words* program was only offered in-person to groups of families. But recently, The Hanen Centre developed an online version of the *More Than Words* program.

The online *More Than Words* program includes the same content and format as the in-person program, but parents meet as a group online. Just like the in-person sessions of the *More Than Words* program, the online parent sessions are interactive, make use of real-life video examples, include large and small group discussions, and provide opportunities for parents to practice the new strategies so they are able support their child's communication. In addition, individual parent-child sessions are held online, during which parents are videorecorded while practicing the program strategies with their child. Parents then review the recording with the speech-language pathologist and, together, they identify what is working and what can be modified to better support the child's communication.

Parents have provided very positive feedback in response to the online *More Than Words* program, such as:

*"It brought us closer and allowed us to better enjoy the opportunities we have to play with one another."*

*"I would tell parents that this program will provide concrete easy tips to implement in your everyday life that will really help your child."*

*"This program will guide you through every step of the way to be successful with helping your child reach their goals."*

The Hanen Centre partnered with researchers at Western University in London, Ontario to study parents' experiences when they participate in the online *More Than Words* program. The researchers asked 21 caregivers who participated in the online program what they thought about attending a program online, as well as their views about changes in their child and in themselves as a result of participating in the online program [1,2]. Here's what the caregivers had to say...

## What are the advantages of attending the program online?

Caregivers talked about the following benefits of attending the *More Than Words* program online [1]:

- **Convenience and cost savings** – families didn't have to spend time travelling to and from sessions or find transportation. There were also no costs associated with gas or parking.
- **Accessibility** – for some families, the online program enabled their partner to participate in parts of the program (while this wouldn't have been possible if the program had been in-person).
- **Familiarity with technology** – the program was delivered over Zoom, a platform that most families had previous experience with and were comfortable with.
- **Comfortable environment** – families felt that their speech-language pathologist created a comfortable environment during the online sessions that encouraged them to discuss and share ideas.
- **Connection with other families** – caregivers enjoyed meeting others with similar experiences and found the online breakout groups during the sessions particularly helpful for connecting. Some families found additional ways to connect, such as through a private Facebook group or by arranging playdates.

## How did caregivers benefit from the online *More Than Words* program?

Caregivers mentioned that they benefitted in several ways [2]:

- **Caregivers learned several strategies to support their child** – caregivers mentioned learning strategies to support their child's communication, such as being face-to-face, adjusting their own language, and pausing more often to provide their child with more opportunities to communicate. They also learned strategies to encourage interaction with their child, such as how to follow their child's lead by including their child's interests and joining in with their child's play. Finally, they talked about learning ways to support their child's play, both with and without toys, and how to add new ideas without disrupting their child's play.
- **Caregivers developed a new mindset** – caregivers became more aware of the ways they could have an impact during interactions with their child. They mentioned that the parent-child sessions with video feedback encouraged them to reflect and helped them gain insight into their behaviour. They also spoke about hope and optimism for the future as a result of learning the program strategies. They felt that the program helped

them focus on their child's unique strengths and gave them a positive outlook for the future.

- **Caregivers gained a support network** – caregivers valued the support they received from the speech-language pathologist leading their program, who encouraged them and provided suggestions specific for their child. They also felt support from the other caregivers attending the program. They enjoyed interacting with other families, sharing stories and ideas, and hearing about how others were using the program strategies.

## How did children benefit from the online *More Than Words* program?

Caregivers reported that their child made improvements in several areas, including [2]:

- using more words and gestures
- taking turns
- joint attention (joint attention happens when two people pay attention to the same thing and let each other know that they are sharing that moment by communicating about it in some way)
- \*looking at their caregivers more often
- showing things to their caregivers
- expressing their needs and preferences

Because of these changes in their child, caregivers felt that they could better understand their child's needs. ]

\*Eye contact is not targeted in the *More Than Words* program. However, when parents find ways to interact and connect with their child, they often report that their child looks at them more often.

## How did the caregiver-child relationship change?

Caregivers mentioned that participating in the *More Than Words* program improved their relationship with their child in these ways [2]:

- **They felt more connected to their child** – because caregivers learned strategies to interact with their child, they had more positive and joyful interactions, which meant they felt more connected. They also mentioned feeling more engaged with their child during daily routines.

- **They better understood their child** – as children’s communication skills improved, caregivers better understood their child’s needs, likes, and dislikes, which also helped them feel connected and it improved their relationship.
- **They learned new ways to play with their child** - caregivers reported learning new ways to join in their child’s play and create more opportunities to engage during games, songs, and when sharing books.

While there are many advantages of attending an intervention program online, there can also be some challenges. A few caregivers in the above studies talked about having technological problems or experiencing distractions at home [1]. To prevent these potential problems, *More Than Words* program leaders are asked to ensure the families are familiar with the technology before the program starts, and they ask families to arrange childcare for the group parent sessions so that they can attend without distractions.

For most families, the advantages and convenience of an online program outweigh any possible challenges. And the outcomes for families in the online program are the same positive outcomes seen in the in-person version of *More Than Words*. Summarizing these positive results, one of the families who participated in the above studies explained:

*“I’m blown away how much I’ve learned...It’s not hard to do. It’s very basic, simple strategies that you can do at home. The world of difference it makes is just astounding.”*  
[1]

To read about other research on the *More Than Words* program, please see our Research Summary.

## References

1. Denusik, L., Servais, M., Glista, D., Hatherly, K., Moodie, S., Oram Cardy, J., Weitzman, E., & Cunningham, B. J. (2023). Families' Experiences in the Virtual Hanen More Than Words Program During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 32(2), 1-16. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2022\\_AJSLP-22-00256](https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_AJSLP-22-00256)
2. Denusik, L., Glista, D., Servais, M., Friesen, J., Oram, J., & Cunningham, B. J. (2024). "We were the best people to do the job": Caregivers' reported outcomes of a virtual caregiver-delivered program for autistic preschoolers. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 9, 1-17. DOI: 10.1177/23969415241244767

### About The Hanen Centre

*The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children's lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.*

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