



# Parent Coaching: How far have we come and how far can we go?

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I'll never forget the first time that I really needed to consider what it means to actively involve families. I was a relatively new clinician and I had just transferred to a new team. The theme of my first team meeting left me feeling a bit overwhelmed: "We all need to improve how actively we involve families in our interventions." Until then, I had been working with older children and intervening directly. I understood the importance of involving families and it made a lot of sense. But it was one thing to understand the rationale and quite another to put it into action. How would I even begin to involve parents more than I was already doing? They were already in the room and watching. I often explained what I was doing before and after the sessions and was very clear with home practice ideas. To add to my dilemma, parents usually had the expectation that I would treat their child. And that's exactly what I was trained to do.

Looking back at that time, I realize that I wasn't alone. Some of my colleagues expressed similar doubts as they started their journey towards being a truly collaborative parent coach.






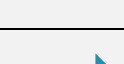
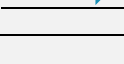
By now, as a Hanen member, you're likely well-versed in all of the reasons that we should focus on coaching parents in our interventions. Research over the last few decades has revealed the benefits of parent coaching and actively involving families, and it's considered best practice in early communication intervention (Brown & Woods, 2016).

Nonetheless, several researchers found that there is great variation with respect to whether and how clinicians are coaching parents (Brown, 2016; Kemp & Turnbull, 2014; Friedman, Woods & Salisbury, 2012; Ward, Reynolds, Pieterse, Elliott, Boyd & Miller, 2019). So why is this?

## Understanding and overcoming barriers to parent coaching

Brown (2016) wrote an interesting article that got to the heart of this issue. In this article, called "Coaching in Parent-Implemented Early Communication Interventions: Understanding and Overcoming Individual-Level Implementation Barriers", she explored some perceived barriers that speech-language pathologists (SLPs) have reported when considering coaching parents in their own practice. Drawing from comments that SLPs made when participating in coaching professional development, the author offers suggestions for overcoming the barriers. These obstacles, involving only individual-level and personal factors, could be grouped into the following categories: a) understanding and knowledge of the role of coaching within early intervention b) preferences, and c) skills with coaching.

Below are just a few of the issues raised by the SLPs – paraphrased from their comments – along with some of the points Brown highlighted to make the case that these hurdles can be overcome.

Perceived barriers to parent coaching		Response
Outside of scope of practice		Coaching is evidence-based and written into the professional guidelines of many governing bodies. Coaching is well-within the scope of practice of early intervention professionals, including speech-language pathologists.
Coaching is just sitting and talking to parents		Coaching involves so much more. It's a process in which the interventionist supports the parent-child interaction using a variety of techniques that are all interrelated and involve the child.
Coaching doesn't provide children enough opportunity to learn and practice.		Coaching actually provides more opportunities for children to learn. Effective coaching serves to build parents' capacity, empowering them to embed their use of supportive strategies into everyday activities and routines.
Families want direct intervention		Coaching can help most families. Parents typically ask for what they know. They may request direct intervention because they are unfamiliar with family-centred approaches. It's crucial to ensure that a parent request is from a truly informed perspective - and not just because direct intervention is what they expect.
Coaching is difficult/uncomfortable		Coaching is a skill that can be developed. Clinicians should explore continuing education opportunities, start small when implementing parent coaching in their practice and find supports (e.g. develop a learning community of other professionals).
Coaching is when parents learn a strategy by observing clinician modeling		Coaching is a complex, cyclical process involving many strategies that encourage the parent to learn through discussion, observation, reflection, trying it out and problem solving. Modeling is just one part of the process and is typically not effective on its own in supporting a parent's learning.

While this article was based on the input from one group of SLPs, we assume that many professionals feel the same way.

## Defining parent coaching

An issue that was touched on by Woods is the fact that the term “coaching” has different meanings to different clinicians and researchers. Over the last few decades, many academics have reported that there really hasn't been an agreed-upon definition of parent coaching in early intervention (Brown, 2016; Kemp & Turnbull, 2014; Friedman, Woods & Salisbury, 2012, Ward, Reynolds, Pieterse, Elliott, Boyd & Miller, 2019). While some have worked to operationalize definitions of coaching (Friedman, Woods & Salisbury, 2012), inconsistencies within the field remain (Ward et al, 2019). As an example, in their 2014 article, Kemp & Turnbull synthesized previous studies on parent coaching in early intervention and found that descriptions of parent coaching ranged from interventionist-directed approaches to relationship-directed approaches. Interventionist-directed approaches were described as being more directive - using a prescribed protocol developed to provide parents with specific training. Relationship-directed approaches on the other hand, involve a more collaborative process, with shared decision making as a central feature.

So, if there has been a history of variation in how coaching is described in the literature, it's no surprise that there would be inconsistencies in coaching practices within early intervention contexts. So as clinicians and early interventionists expected to include parent coaching in our work, what approach should we follow?

Kemp & Turnbull (2019) pointed out that many researchers argue for the need to truly empower families by building their capacity – gathering their input and collaborating. This is in contrast to what the authors described as a more formal and directive approach that would be seen in interventionist-directed approaches. The need for active involvement has been emphasized in the literature (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Friedman, Woods & Salisbury, 2012).

Some researchers have analyzed the efficacy of the most common coaching strategies. The following elements were found to be necessary to ensure effective outcomes in parent coaching:

- Sharing information/ knowledge
- Observing the parent-child interaction
- Demonstrating a strategy
- Encouraging and supporting the parent to practice with feedback
- Encouraging parent reflection, evaluation, and active problem solving
- Joint planning with the parent

(Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Friedman, Woods & Salisbury, 2012)

The research clearly states that it's not simply a matter of selecting a few of these components. Rather, we need to incorporate each of these elements systematically within our intervention if we want parents to fully grasp the purpose of the strategy and use it successfully.

## Hanen's approach to parent coaching

This is a lot of information to sift through. Fortunately, the Hanen Centre has taken the key principles and requirements from the research and embedded these within a four-step coaching model that is clear and easy-to-implement. This coaching model emphasizes the clinician's role as a partner to the parent, with the parent being the primary agent of change. Active involvement and collaboration with parents are key, and this is facilitated by reflective discussions throughout the four steps of the coaching model. The four steps include:

### 1) Getting the parent ready for learning

Dunst & Trivette (2009) discuss the importance of introducing the new topic using exercises, discussions and activities that get the parent ready for learning. This step is critical but often omitted. In the context of intervention, this could be accomplished by having the parent read some material or watch a video of the target strategy in action as a first step. The clinician could also initiate a discussion about the parent's goals and how the strategy relates to the parent's goals.

### 2) Showing and describing the new strategy

Illustrating a new strategy was found to be another vital coaching practice (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). In early intervention, parents need to see what the strategy looks like when it's used effectively. There are a few ways to do this. The clinician could model using the strategy with the child or the clinician could show a video example of the strategy in action. But Step 2 isn't only about demonstrating. Friedman, Woods & Salisbury (2012) emphasize that clinicians should narrate their actions - describing what they are doing and why they're doing it, while also emphasizing the impact of the strategy on the child. In addition, it's important to consistently check in with parents to get their input and help them reflect on how they could use the strategy.

### 3) Supporting the parent to try out the strategy

This is a central aspect of the intervention session and likely the lengthiest part. Dunst & Trivette (2009) found this to be the most effective way of ensuring learner engagement. The concept of caregiver practice with guided feedback, in which clinicians support parents as they are working with the child, was discussed by Friedman, Woods & Salisbury (2012). Support is provided through feedback and by encouraging self reflection. This means giving clear direction to the parent when needed and helping the parent evaluate their use of the strategy and reflect on the impact this practice has on their child.

### 4) Collaborating with the parent to plan their next steps

Both Dunst & Trivette (2009) and Friedman, Woods & Salisbury (2012) discuss the importance of collaborating with the parent to plan their next steps. A conversation about what the parent can continue to do at home and how they will remember to do this occurs at the end of each session.

These elements of effective parent coaching are embedded within every Hanen workshop for professionals and are an integral part of the Hanen 4 "I"s to Socialize™ and SPARK Communication™ trainings.

It's important to remember that moving to a truly collaborative parent-coaching model is a journey. And we may all be at different points along this path. The article by Woods (2016) was helpful for me to reflect on what personal barriers I experienced as I was learning and growing as a parent coach. Over the last few decades, I know that I've come a long way. There was a shift from being hesitant to even trying to use parent coaching to where I feel I am now: always focused on engaging parents as partners, regardless of the family, the child or the intervention context. I'll admit that it hasn't always been smooth, but the value I've experienced by collaborating with parents in all of my interventions has been huge. The benefits have ranged from more buy-in and participation from parents, more confidence in my own skills and better progress in the children.

So what has parent coaching done for your practice and where are you in this journey? The following are some questions to consider:

- Is parent coaching the focus of all your early communication interventions? Is it limited to certain contexts or certain families?
- Are there some instances in which you feel you can't effectively coach parents?
- Is there anything that makes partnering with parents difficult?
- What obstacles have you overcome on your path to effective parent coaching?
- Is there room to expand and refine your coaching skills?

## Additional Resources

For more on the key coaching principles supported by the research, see the following articles:

- *Coaching Parents: Are We Ready?*
- *Parent-Implemented Early Language Intervention: What Really Works?*

E-seminars:

- Taking Coaching to the Next Level: Helping Parents Make Behaviour Changes that Stick!

## 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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