



Childcare After COVID-19: Balancing Precautions While Building Interactions

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In the last few months, the novel coronavirus outbreak has forced society to adapt in unprecedented ways. As organizations prepare to reopen, those of you consulting to childcare centres may be wondering how the support you provide to childcare staff will be impacted. While centres around the world may be adopting different protocols, a quick Google search of “*what will child cares look like when they reopen?*” reveals a laundry list of health and safety precautions, including but not limited to:

- providers will need to physically distance from children (6 ft when possible)
- providers will wear facemasks
- parents will no longer be permitted in the building during drop off/pick up
- children will be supervised in small groups
- family groupings may become more common, meaning that children grouped together may not be the same age
- limiting toys and materials to those that can easily be disinfected (i.e. no sensory water tables, sand, playdough)
- activities that promote individual play will be encouraged
- possible limitations on books
- each child may need his/her own “kit” of toys

Receiving less attention in the media is how educators can be expected **to maintain quality interactions with children amidst these new protocols**. Health and safety measures will undoubtedly place additional demands on educators’ time and attention, potentially reducing opportunities to have meaningful interactions with children. As educators prepare to navigate this new normal, they may look to you for guidance to proactively identify ways to promote language and social development within the childcare setting. This may mean compensating for some new barriers to engaging with young children. The following article provides concrete suggestions to share with educators for building meaningful interactions with children in the wake of COVID-19 precautions.

Facemasks and their impact on interaction and language development

Language, speech and social development are so dependent on face-to-face interaction between adults and children. However, when a caregiver wears a facemask:

- **facial expressions become more difficult to read** – Young children look to the facial expression of their caregivers to interpret unfamiliar situations. When unsure, a child will look to a caregiver for cues; a smiling, happy face will reassure him that what he is doing is safe and acceptable and a fearful facial expression will suggest caution or possible danger. This is called *social referencing* and develops in infancy (Gibson & Walk, 1960).
- **it is more difficult for an adult to show their interest in what a child is doing or saying** – Infants and toddlers look to caregivers for a reaction or sign of interest. Excited facial expressions in response to what children are doing or saying show interest and encourage turn-taking which keeps the interaction going. Children may be less likely to engage when they are unable to observe an encouraging response from their caregiver.
- **speech may be muffled** – this makes it less interesting for the child to listen to. Quieter, muffled speech can also be more difficult to understand and more challenging for children to notice the subtle features of the adults' grammar like plural and verb tense endings as well as smaller grammatical words (e.g., is, to)

Strategies for educators wearing facemasks

- **Speak loudly and clearly** to circumvent the muffling effect of a facemask
- **Lower yourself to the child's physical level** even though you may be distanced
- **Exaggerate your intonation** in the absence of being able to use facial expression to augment and clarify your message
- **Exaggerate your gestures** which will help get a child's attention and provide visual cues in the absence of the child being able to fully see your facial expression
- **Consider wearing a badge with a photo of yourself**
- **Use gestures to encourage a child to take another turn** in an interaction or conversation, e.g., hold out your arm, lean your body toward the child
- **Aim to convey your message with your eyes** as much as possible such as using wide eyes when surprised, disapproving eyes when attempting to discourage a behavior, smiling eyes when happy, sad eyes when upset
- **Make explicit comments to draw children's attention to your feelings**, e.g., "*Look how happy my eyes look*"; "*Look how surprised I am. My eyes are so wide!*"
- **Encourage parents to play with masks with their children** so that children become more comfortable with seeing masks at childcare. Play at taking them on and off so children understand that the person wearing them is the same friendly person they have always known even if part of their face is hidden. Mask play can turn into a game where parents reveal a smile, frown, surprised look, etc. Parents can make comments such as, "*Even though you couldn't see my mouth, I was smiling and happy to see you!*"

Physical distancing and its impact on interaction and language development

Children typically interact with adults who are close to them, with the best interactions happening during activities where adults **observe, wait and listen** to determine what children are interested in or what they are communicating and then **follow the child's lead**, often joining in the child's activity. However, it will be more difficult to notice what children are doing from afar and educators may not be able to use all of the familiar ways to engage children (e.g.

getting close to the child by going down to his level while face-to-face, touching the child, joining in the child's activities and handling the same toys or materials as the child). As a result, children may be more distractible when the educator is not close to them to keep them engaged and may initiate less often.

Strategies for educators who are physically distancing

- **While maintaining physical distance, aim to still be low at the child's physical level**, so your non-verbal cues are more obvious to the child
- **Comment frequently** on what you observe children doing so that they know you are interested and paying attention
- **Have similar materials to what the children have** so you can:
 - *imitate* what they are doing
 - *expand* on what they are doing by doing something different using the same materials
 - *extend* the topic when appropriate by making a comment or asking a question that encourages children to think more deeply (e.g. while playing with toy insects and a magnifying glass, you could say, "*Spiders make me feel scared*" and/or "*When you see bugs inside your house, what do you do?*")
- **Incorporate "people play" activities** that allow you to engage children, follow their lead and extend the interaction without materials or physical proximity, e.g., Simon Says, action songs, making up stories together, guessing games, I Spy, etc.

Small group size and its impact on interaction and language development

Having interactions with small groups of children is actually a key benchmark when assessing quality childcare (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Early Childhood, 2017, para. 6). The new mandate for smaller groupings of children does away with previous issues around ineffective large group circles and activities. Theoretically, this should make it easier to engage all children in a group activity.

However, for some centres, the reality of family groupings may make group activities more challenging since the children may be at very different developmental levels. For example, educators who typically work with infants may now be caring for a mixed group including toddlers and preschoolers. As speech-language pathologists and early learning consultants it will be important to educate staff around what to expect from each child developmentally. In other words, educators will need to know the different ways that children can take their turns within an interaction depending on their stage of development. For example, an infant might take a turn by smiling or reaching whereas a toddler might make eye contact and combine two words together.

Understanding how children at different developmental levels are able to participate within an interaction will help educators recognize and respond appropriately to children's initiations and responses. This knowledge will help also help staff provide language models that match children's language stage.

Helping educators make the most of small groups

The Hanen Centre's Learning Language and Loving It™ Program and Teacher Talk™ Training Series introduce a strategy called SSCAN to help educators build language-rich interaction with children in groups. SSCAN stands for:

- **S - small groups are best** – groupings of three to five children are preferred for encouraging interaction. Physical distancing measures may now make it easier to support educators with organizing small group interactions.
- **S - select an appropriate activity** – this is now more important than ever. Not only do providers need to consider an appropriate activity for interaction, but all the guidelines for health and safety must also be respected. The important thing, though, is not to lose sight of the interaction focus. Activities should:
 - interest all the children
 - allow all the children to be involved with respect to appropriate developmental expectations (can the child attend to the activity, participate with the materials, interact as much as possible with the educator and his peers while maintaining distancing?)
 - allow the provider to easily see all the children (even with physical distancing), with a particular emphasis on those children who are challenging to engage being positioned front and centre (i.e. directly across from the educator)
 - not involve too many props/materials for the child to manipulate which may detract from the interaction/conversation
- **C - carefully observe** – interactions happen when children are both interested and actively involved in an activity. Watching for children's interest and participation will be particularly important with physical distancing since the provider will need to keep moving her head around what will be much larger circle than would typically result from a small group of children.
- **A - adapt to each child's focus** – aim to notice children's initiations and responses and follow their lead. Doing this successfully means that the provider continues to observe around the group, uses her own materials to join in play, and makes responsive comments that match a child's language level.
- **N - now keep it going** – continue to keep children engaged and interacting throughout the activity

Literacy activities and their impact on interaction and language development

The book centre is a prime area for sharing books with children and having conversations that promote the development of emergent literacy skills. Several restrictions will now be placed on materials in the classroom that are difficult to sanitize and at this point, it is unclear whether books will be permitted given some mixed messages about the transmissibility of the virus on paper. A growing concern is that providers may turn to audio or online books that generally provide limited or no opportunities for interaction or active engagement of the children.

Suggestions for book reading

If paper books are off limits, ways of providing books that can be sanitized should be explored, such as bathtub and laminated books, which can include ones that are homemade. Other suggestions include:

- **Group book sharing** where the educator holds the book is an ideal way to engage a group who is distanced and does not require the children to touch anything or each other.
- **Offer easy to clean props** to children that encourage participation and interaction, such as a toy digger while reading *Where Do Diggers Sleep at Night?*
- **Read with animation**
- **Make sure the book is large and clear enough** for the children to see the illustrations
- **Pause frequently to encourage interaction and conversation** with the children. Pausing helps you create opportunities to act out the story, imitate actions, ask questions, make interesting comments and relate the book to the children's personal experiences.

Helping educators recognize existing and new opportunities for incidental conversation

Now more than ever, it will be important for childcare providers to make the most of incidental conversations throughout the day when distancing is not possible (e.g. toileting/diapering, handwashing, applying sunscreen, infant feeding, etc.). Staff can make these routines interactive using the same strategies they would during play; by turning the routine into a game, talking about what they are doing, and making interesting comments or asking questions that are responsive to the child and that invite more conversation.

New protocols can also offer new opportunities for incidental conversation. For example, arrivals are an important time when children may be keen to share information with providers. However, new drop-off procedures may create a lot more separation anxiety for children. Although this may be a very stressful time for the child, it can also be an opportunity for the provider doing an arrival screening to have a brief incidental conversation with the child. This may reduce the child's anxiety and at the same time, provide support for language development.

Helpful strategies here could include:

- **Labeling the child's emotions** (e.g. *"I know you're sad to leave Mommy"*)
- **Using a song or fun way of walking into the centre**
- **Giving the child a role** (e.g. helping to bring something important into the classroom, etc.)
- **Wearing masks with funny designs** (e.g., cat's whiskers) that could distract the child and stimulate a brief conversation (and even introduce new vocabulary, such as *whiskers*)
- **Engaging a child in a brief guessing game** to guess who or what is waiting for him in the childcare room. A game like this supports language development by building *decontextualized language* (language that goes beyond the here and now)

Summary

While COVID-19 health and safety recommendations continue to evolve, there is one thing we know for certain: that childcare in the near future will look and feel very different. The good news is that many of the same principles for stimulating language, literacy and social development in children still apply. The key will be helping childcare providers to recognize these opportunities despite many new precautionary demands that will be placed on them.

Take a look at the following resources for more information:

- ***Learning Language and Loving It*** – The Hanen Program® for Early Childhood Educators is designed to provide early childhood educators with practical strategies for helping all children in the classroom build language and social skills, no matter what their learning and communication styles are, and even if they have special needs.
- ***ABC and Beyond™*** – The Hanen Program® for Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings provides educators with practical strategies to help preschool children develop early literacy.

References

- American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Early Childhood. (July 31, 2017). *Why quality matters in early child care: AAP policy explained*. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/work-play/Pages/Why-Quality-Matters-in-Early-Child-Care.aspx>
- Gibson, E. J., & Walk, R. D. (1960). The "visual cliff". *Scientific American*, 202(4), 64-71.
- Weitzman, E., & Greenberg, J. (2002). *Learning language and loving it: A guide to promoting children's social, language and literacy development in early childhood settings*. Hanen Centre.

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.

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