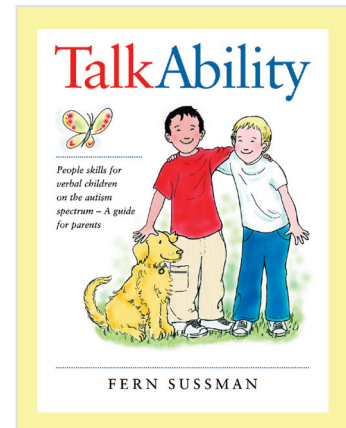


# The Research Base for TalkAbility™ – The Hanen Program® for Parents of Verbal Children on the Autism Spectrum

In the *TalkAbility* program, parents learn to help their young child on the autism spectrum:

- participate in more extended back and forth conversations
- tune into what people say without words in a conversation
- understand how other people feel and know how to respond
- expand their play skills and strengthen their friendship skills



## Theory of Mind: The basis for social communication

Like all Hanen programs, *TalkAbility* is based on principles that are consistent with best practice recommendations: involving parents as early as possible in their child's intervention program and facilitating communication in naturalistic contexts. And, like all Hanen Programs, *TalkAbility*'s content draws from the research on what helps these children develop their social skills, especially in the area of empathy and perspective-taking. The literature uses the term, “theory of mind” to describe this ability to understand what someone else thinks or feels. In the *TalkAbility* program, parents learn to think about theory of mind as “tuning in” to others.

## Research on what helps children develop “theory of mind” is built into TalkAbility™

There is an abundance of research that shows that “parent talk” is crucial to the young child's development of a theory-of-mind or tuning in (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2014; Kimhi, 2014). For instance, children whose parents talk to them about desires, especially contrasting the *differences* among what people desire, subsequently have a better understanding of how others feel and think. So, even something as simple as discussing the different cereals that each family member likes can help children develop perspective-taking. This research is reflected in what parents learn in the *TalkAbility* program as they learn to use the kind of talk that is known to foster the child’s development of “theory of mind”.

The ability to understand what's on the minds of others doesn't occur spontaneously in children on the autism spectrum. Since these children are often late to talk or may not use mental state language in their conversations (i.e. words such as “thinks,” “knows,” and “remembers”), parents often avoid talking to them about feelings and thoughts, focusing instead on concrete language about the here-and-now. Consequently the children may not receive the very language input that has been shown to contribute to the development of a robust understanding of the mind. *TalkAbility* helps parents choose specific tuning-in vocabulary words that their children need to hear and helps them incorporate these words into their everyday conversations with their children.

## Research on using a child's emerging language skill to develop and cement concepts

The latest research shows that parental input is only part of what helps children develop a theory-of-mind. Once children have the language that enables them to discuss what's going on in someone else's mind, with words like “he thinks,” or “he knows,” their development of theory-of-mind takes off (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2014). Research shows that children on the autism spectrum often need language to enable them to develop concepts (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2014). So, when children with autism acquire the ability to formulate sentences that include mental state verbs (think, feel) (for example, “He *thinks that* he's the best player”), they have a way to imagine other people's thoughts as well as talk about them.

In the *TalkAbility* program, parents are encouraged to listen for when their child uses phrases like, “I *think* so,” and “I don't *know*” so they can pick up on them and use more of this kind of language themselves, giving their children even more models of abstract language from which to learn.

## Research on the development of theory of mind helps parents know what the next step is

Every aspect of the *TalkAbility* program is grounded in the research on how theory-of-mind develops in young children, starting with the infant's ability to infer meaning from the eye gaze of his mother, followed by the five stages that children gradually master from birth to about six years of age:

- Stage 1** understanding wanting: when children understand that people want different things;
- Stage 2** understanding thinking: when children understand people think differently;
- Stage 3** understanding that seeing leads to knowing: when children understand that seeing something themselves doesn't mean another person can see the same thing;
- Stage 4** understanding hidden feelings: when children understand that what we say or how we look isn't always the way we feel inside, and;
- Stage 5** understanding false beliefs: when children understand that people can sometimes think things are true when they're not.

By helping parents understand how theory of mind develops, the *TalkAbility* program helps them determine the next step their child needs to take in his understanding of people and in doing so, they help prepare him for more successful relationships with peers.

# References

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