



Helping Children with Language Delay Develop “Theory of Mind”

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If you have a child with language delay, the following may be areas that you and your speech-language pathologist are helping your child improve:

- Understanding and using new words
- Forming sentences
- Using proper grammar

These are common goals for children with delayed language.

But researchers are discovering that there’s another area that may need some attention, and it’s an area that is often overlooked in therapy. Studies show that children with language delay often have problems with “theory of mind”^[1].

What is theory of mind?

Theory of mind involves understanding that people have thoughts and beliefs, and that these may be different from one’s own thoughts and beliefs. It allows us to understand that people act according to what they think or believe is true, even if it isn’t. Ultimately, theory of mind involves being able to “tune in” to other people and their perspectives.

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This ability begins in infancy when young children learn to pay attention to other people’s emotions and actions. Children learn to copy what people do and eventually pretend to be other people (during imaginary play). These abilities show that they have figured out that others do and say things that are different from what they might do themselves. When children start to say things like “He **knows** that she is coming” or “She **thinks** that he took it”, it shows us that they are thinking about what others are thinking.

How does theory of mind affect a child's development?

Being able to tune in to other people's perspectives might not sound like a big deal, but when children have difficulty developing their theory of mind, it makes it difficult to:

- understand why people do and say the things they do
- have a conversation
- tell a story
- take turns
- understand characters' perspectives in storybooks
- make friends
- play in imaginative ways (pretend play)

Understanding other people's perspectives is essential for communication. Imagine trying to have a conversation without having a sense of what the other person might be thinking or why that person is behaving in a certain way. It's easy to provide your listener with far too many (or not enough) details if you don't have an idea about his experiences, feelings or point of view.

Helping children develop theory of mind

There are many simple ways to encourage theory of mind skills. Children with language delay who are at early stages of language development can benefit from:

- **Face-to-face, playful interactions** – when you follow your child's lead and engage in activities that spark your child's interests, he will naturally want to connect with you and pay attention to what you are doing and saying. Children need to pay attention to what others are doing in order to start thinking about others' perspectives.

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Children with language delay who are more verbal may benefit from:

- **Role play** – when children pretend to be someone else, they need to think about and act out the other person's perspective and behaviour. Therefore, role play helps them think about other people's points of view. When your child pretends to be someone else, join in with him and take on a role yourself. For example, if your child is pretending to be a doctor, you could be the patient. Talk to your child as if he is a doctor – this will help him stay in his role (e.g. "Doctor, my leg really hurts. Can you help me?").
- **Sharing storybooks** – when you read together, try to discuss what the characters might be thinking or feeling. Look for opportunities to use sentences that include the words "thinks that" (e.g. "He thinks that the monkey will run away"). Encourage your child to talk about the story in the same way by asking questions like "Why do you think he is...?" Misunderstandings or problems during the storyline often provide wonderful times to talk about the characters' different perspectives.

- **“Tuning in” words** – there are many words we use all the time that describe our perspective, like “want”, “know”, “think” or “forget”. Children need to understand and use these words in order to express their own perspective and tune in to others. A good place to start is with the words “want” and “like” as these develop earliest. Emphasizing peoples’ wants and likes can happen during an everyday activity like mealtime, by comparing what your child likes with other family members’ likes (e.g. “You like chocolate cake but Daddy and I like vanilla”). This helps children understand that other people have different wants and likes than they do.

By helping your child tune in to others, you will build his ability to think about others’ perspectives. And ultimately, this will help him be a better storyteller, playmate and conversation partner.

More information about theory of mind development in young children can be found in [TalkAbility™²](#), a research-based guidebook and intervention program aimed at promoting the social and special language abilities necessary for conversations and friendships

References

1. Nilsson, K. K. & de López, K. J. (2016). Theory of mind in children with specific language impairment: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 87(1), 143-153.
2. Sussman, F. (2006). *TalkAbility™ – People skills for verbal children on the autism spectrum: A guide for parents*. Toronto, ON: Hanen Early Language Program.

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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