

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice: How Hanen Programs Fit and How We Have Evolved our More Than Words® Program

By Elaine Weitzman, Executive Director and Lesia Partyka, Senior Speech-Language Pathologist for Autism Services

We're excited to announce that we've just updated More Than Words® – The Hanen Program® for Parents of Autistic Children or Children Who May Benefit from Social Communication Support.

Part of this update involved our doing research on what constitutes a neurodiversity-affirming approach and then analyzing More Than Words® and other Hanen Programs in terms of the fundamental elements of this approach. In this article, we provide information on how both More Than Words® and It Takes Two to Talk® – The Hanen Program® for Parents of children with Language Delays offer a neurodiversity affirming approach to our work with families. We then provide some details on the updated 2024 version of More Than Words® program.

Below we summarise the essence of a neurodiversity-affirming approach and how our programs reflect these fundamental elements.

The Fundamental Elements of a Neurodiversity-affirming Approach

1. Interventions should be strengths-based and respect and enhance those things that bring happiness and joy

This is truly the foundation of all Hanen Programs. The Hanen approach helps each parent look closely at their child and identify their individual strengths and preferences. *More Than Words* guides parents in the process of identifying their child's strengths, preferences and interests and builds on these to engage the child in the joyful back-and-forth interactions that create rich opportunities for communication development. Similarly, *It Takes Two to Talk* guides parents to identify their child's strengths and interests and helps them incorporate these into enjoyable everyday interactions that build the child's communication.

Neurodiversity-affirming interventions presume competence – and Hanen Programs have ***always*** focused on the child's strengths and abilities. This has always been where the Hanen approach begins.

2. Interventions should support caregivers and the relationship between the child and the important people in their life – in other words, they should promote “goodness of fit.”

Hanen supported the “goodness of fit” between children and their caregivers long before the term became widely used. We help parents recognize what their child *can* do and what they enjoy. They integrate these abilities and preferences into their everyday interactions with their child, within which they apply the responsive interaction strategies they learn in the program. In this way, we help parents build their capacity to engage their child in frequent, enjoyable interactions that provide a natural context for supporting the child's communication development.

3. Interventions should be child-led and should increase the child's sense of autonomy and self-determination

All Hanen programs constitute a child-led approach. They all begin by helping parents learn to encourage their child to ***initiate and lead the interaction.***

Hanen's strong focus on:

- **Observe, Wait and Listen™; and**
- **Follow the Child's lead**

...supports the child's **intrinsic motivation** to communicate. These strategies build the child's sense of autonomy and self-determination, encouraging the child to lead the interaction and communicate more frequently about whatever is of interest to them, giving them a sense of control as to what they communicate about and when.

4. Interventions should promote pleasure and well-being

We believe that Hanen programs go beyond building children's ability to communicate. When parents learn to use specific responsive interaction strategies during everyday interactions with their child, they build their child's functional communication so that the child can increase their participation in both family and community life. This increases the entire family's sense of well-being and often results in parents saying at the end of their Hanen Program, “We now have so much more fun together as a family!”

5. Neuro-affirmative interventions do not attempt to have as their goal “normative behaviour”, nor do they attempt to “cure” autistic children

Hanen Programs have never focused on what children should be doing at specific age levels. We have always emphasized helping parents to recognize their child's current communication skills, meeting them where they are at and building on their existing skills. In addition, our autism programs have never had the goal of curing or trying to make autistic children fit the

mold of neurotypical children. We have always recognized the unique ways autistic children socialize, communicate and sense the world and we have helped parents understand, support and expand these abilities.

Updates to the *More Than Words*® Program

In the 2024 update, the essence of the *More Than Words* Program remains the same. However, our clinical team did make some changes to the program's assessment protocol and strategies, as well as modifying some elements in order to make our approach more consistently neurodiversity-affirming.

The changes to the *More Than Words* program include:

- Changing the *More Than Words* program name to: **More Than Words® – The Hanen Program® for Parents of Autistic Children or Children Who May Benefit from Social Communication Support.**
- **Change in focus for goals:** Updates to the goals further entrench our belief that all forms of communication are valid, and that the child may need time to progress to the next stage of communication. We now help parents encourage their child to do more at their current stage of communication or move to the next stage, but there is less of a focus on “moving up” to the next stage. When addressing goals in play, there is more focus on self-directed and intrinsically motivated play with toys or objects and less focus on the kinds of toys the children are playing with. Parents learn how to give their children opportunities to explore the play they currently enjoy or to use their interests to explore new ways to play.
- **Use of identity first language:** *More Than Words* is now using identity first language.
- **Neurodiversity-affirming language:** We have changed how we describe the social communication skills of autistic children. All changes aim to be more descriptive and to align with neurodiversity-affirming language use. Here are a few examples:
 - **The “Own Agenda Stage” has been renamed the “Explorer Stage.”** While remaining parent-friendly, we wanted a label that better summarizes the abilities of children at this stage.
 - **The “Intrude” strategy has been renamed as “Introduce more fun.”** We feel this change better represents the intent of the strategy. While the Intrude strategy was never intended to change or reject what the child was doing, it is understandable that the word “Intrude” could be interpreted differently. The label “Introduce more fun” provides a clearer picture of the strategy's intent and purpose and focuses on the child's interests, preferences and motivations.
 - **Videos of autistic girls** are now included within the video examples.
 - **Updated information regarding Gestalt Language Acquisition – *More Than***

Words has always acknowledged echolalia as meaningful communication and helped parents think about the messages their child is communicating with echolalia. *More Than Words* is focused on social communication, but because social communication and language are inextricably linked, speech-language pathologists can determine how a child appears to be developing language and support parents in modelling and interpreting language that is most meaningful for their child.

- **The *More Than Words* guidebook will be updated** – this will start in 2024. We expect this to take some time and do not have a specific launch date.

Have questions about the updated program? Please feel free to reach out to our Director for Autism Services, Anne McDade, at anne.mcdade@hanen.org.

Considering More Than Words® Certification?

If you've considered becoming certified in More Than Words, now is a great time to gain the framework and resources to support families of autistic children on your caseload. All upcoming More Than Words workshops focus on supporting you to offer the updated program, as well to incorporate the strategies in your 1-1 parent coaching sessions. For ASHA members, Continuing Education Units for More Than Words have also just increased to 2.30 ASHA CEUs.

Considering It Takes Two to Talk® Certification?

Are you looking to involve and empower parents of children with language delays to become their child's best language facilitator? The It Takes Two to Talk certification workshop provides you with the resources and framework to offer an evidence-based program for a group of parents or to use in 1-1 parent coaching sessions. For ASHA members, Continuing Education Units for It Takes Two to Talk have just increased to 2.25 ASHA CEUs.

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.

Visit www.hanen.org for more information.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)