



## The Power of Parents in Autism Intervention

**By Lauren Lowry**  
**Clinical Staff Writer and Hanen SLP**

If you've read our articles about the role parents can play in language intervention (see [“Parents as ‘Speech Therapists’: What a New Study Shows”](#) and [“Parents’ Role in Language Intervention”](#)), you'll know that nowadays, parents are seen as partners with speech language professionals (SLPs). Instead of watching the SLP as they provide the therapy, parents and SLPs work together so the parent can become the “therapist.” With guidance from the SLP, parents learn how to help their child at home. In this way, parents can turn any everyday activity into an opportunity for communication, and essentially provide therapy every day for their child. This type of collaboration between parents and SLPs is called “parent-implemented intervention”.

But what about parents of children on the autism spectrum? Is it effective when parents provide therapy at home with their child? Autism affects children's ability to interact and play, and parents sometimes find it difficult to catch their child's attention, engage them in an activity, or know which types of toys are appropriate for their child. This raises the question...

*If parent-implemented intervention relies on the parent helping their child at home, does it work if the parent is struggling to interact and engage with their child?*

### Study reveals that parent-implemented autism intervention works!

Studies that have looked at parent-implemented intervention have often included children with a wide variety of language abilities and diagnoses [1,2]. But a group of researchers from Illinois decided to review studies specific to children on the autism spectrum [3]. Hedda Meadan and her colleagues looked at twelve studies of parent-implemented intervention with young children on the autism spectrum\*. While the interventions in the different studies taught the parents a variety of approaches and strategies, all of the studies involved teaching parents to work directly with their child at home. Altogether, 105 children (and 110 parents) were included in these studies.

*\*More Than Words®, the Hanen parent-implemented intervention program for young children on the autism spectrum was the subject of a [research study in 2011](#). However, the results were not included in Meadan's review because her study only covered research published between 1997 and 2007.*

### **Meadan and her colleagues found positive benefits for both parents and children**

The twelve studies showed that:

- Parents successfully learned new strategies to use with their children at home
- Parents' use of these new strategies resulted in positive changes in their children's social and communication skills

What these results mean is that parents of children on the autism spectrum are able to learn strategies to help their child, and when they use these strategies, their child's communication improves. And in answer to the question posed above.... yes, even though parents may find it difficult to engage their child at times, they can learn ways to interact with their child that promote communication and social interaction.

Even though parents may find it difficult to engage their child at times, they can learn ways to interact with their child that promote communication and social interaction.

## **What else do experts say about involving parents in autism intervention?**

Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics asked several top autism researchers for their recommendations about the best way to intervene with young children on the autism spectrum [4]. They suggested that parents should play a central role in their child's intervention, and that...

"Current best practices for children aged 3 years with suspected or confirmed ASD should have active involvement of families and/or caregivers as part of the intervention" (4, p. S75).

They felt that when parents use daily routines as learning opportunities, it helps the child use their new skills in a variety of everyday situations (as opposed to learning new things in a clinic, which then involves re-learning how to use the skills at home).

Meadan and her colleagues suggest that there are some barriers to parent-implemented intervention. Two of these barriers are parents' access to parent-friendly materials that describe how to use strategies with their child, and professionals' lack of training related to working with parents and helping them learn strategies. They feel that with more resources for parents and training for professionals, parent-implemented intervention can be more widely used.

## **Making parent-implemented intervention happen**

The Hanen Centre has paved the way for parent-implemented language intervention since the 1970s. This is captured in its mission statement:

*The Hanen Centre provides the important people in a young child's life with the knowledge and training they need to help the child develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills.*

Recognizing the need for parent-friendly resources and programs, The Hanen Centre has two programs to help families with a child on the autism spectrum build social communication skills:

- [More Than Words® — The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children on the Autism Spectrum or Who Have Social Communication Difficulties](#) - *More Than Words* was designed for parents of children age 5 and under on the autism spectrum or with other social communication difficulties. The program provides parents with strategies and support to help their child improve his or her communication, play, and imitation skills, as well as back-and-forth interactions.
- [TalkAbility™ — The Hanen Program® for Parents of Verbal Children on the Autism Spectrum](#) - Specifically designed for parents of verbal children ages 3-7 with social communication difficulties, *TalkAbility* teaches parents practical ways to help their child learn “people skills”. “People skills” refers to the ability to “tune in” to the thoughts and feelings of others, which is essential for successful conversations and for making friends. *TalkAbility* helps parents learn how to encourage their child to have back-and-forth conversations, pay attention to non-verbal messages, tune in to what others might be thinking, tell stories, play imaginatively, and make friends.

These programs have companion [guidebooks](#) that are filled with easy-to-use information and tips so that parents can start building their child’s social communication skills right away.

## You are your child’s best teacher

The power of involving parents in their child’s intervention cannot be underestimated. As Meadan and her colleagues explain:

“...a few hours of therapy each week does not result in the type of developmental gains for children compared to those achieved by teaching families intervention strategies and encouraging them to take advantage of the ‘teachable moments’ they have with their children in home and community environments” [3, p. 103].

Parent-implemented intervention provides a child with the most possible opportunities to learn, since they are learning during their everyday life, each and every day. And because they are learning new things at home with the people closest to them, learning becomes natural, motivating, and fun. When parents and speech language pathologists team up and collaborate in this way, it ensures that a child on the autism spectrum learns from the best possible teachers – their parents.

## References

1. Rakap, S. & Rakap, S. (2014). Parent-implemented naturalistic language interventions for young children with disabilities: A systematic review of single-subject experimental designs. *Educational Research Review*, 13, 35-51.
2. Roberts, M., & Kaiser, A. (2011). The Effectiveness of Parent-Implemented Language Intervention: A Meta-Analysis. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20, 180–199.
3. Meadan, H., Ostrosky, M. M., Zaghlawan, H. Y., & Yu, S. (2009). Promoting the social and communicative behavior of young children with autism spectrum disorders: A review of parent-implemented intervention studies. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 29(2), 90-104.
4. Zwaigenbaum, L., Bauman, M.L., Choueiri, R., Kasari, C., Carter, A., Granpeesheh, D., Mailloux, Z., Smith Roley, S., Wagner, S., Fein, D., Pierce, K., Buie, T., Davis, P.A., Newschaffer, C., Robins, D., Wetherby, A., Stone, W.L., Yirmiya, N., Estes, A., Hansen, R.L., McPartland, J.C., Natowicz, M.R. (2015). Early Intervention for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder Under 3 Years of Age: Recommendations for Practice and Research. *Pediatrics*, 136(Suppl. 1), S60-S81.