

How Can You Help Children Send Intentional Messages?

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Parents know their child best, so they are in the best position to become their child’s “interpreter”. When parents of children at the very earliest stages of communication learn to identify and respond to all of their child’s subtle signals and messages, they help their child develop intentional communication. As a professional who works closely with children and their parents, you play an important role in helping parents notice these subtle signals and support children in sending intentional messages.

Here are some strategies you can use and also share with parents to help children send intentional messages:

- **Become a message detective:** By carefully noticing what a child is doing, you can start to keep track of the ways he or she sends messages (although not intentionally). You can do this by:
 - *Observing the child* – notice the child’s facial expressions actions, and focus/interes
 - *Listening to the child* – notice the child’s sounds and the situations during which he or she made those sounds
- **Be face to face with the child:** It’s easier to observe a child and encourage communication when you are face to face.
- **Be the child’s interpreter:** Once you’ve figured out all of the subtle ways the child may be communicating (although not intentionally), you can “interpret” these messages by responding as if the child has sent an intentional message to you. For example, if she looks at a toy monkey, you could give her the toy and say, “Oh you want the monkey!” This will help her make the connection that her behaviour has meaning to you.
- **Use motivating activities in which the child has opportunities to send a message:** Choose activities that include fun actions – for example, blowing bubbles, social games like peek-a-boo, or playing with a motivating toy like a wind-up toy. Activities like these encourage the child to send messages to get the game to continue, even if the message isn’t sent intentionally. The child may wriggle, make a sound or reach for the toy to show that he wants more.

- **Pause and wait at a predictable moment during the activities:** This provides the child with a chance to send a message to you. This means doing the activity a few times and then waiting before you, for example, blow the bubbles again. This allows the child to show you in some way that he wants you to do it again. When you wait, it is important to look at the child and lean in close so he knows you are expecting him to do something. When he does some action, no matter how subtle, immediately continue the activity (i.e., blow the bubble).

By becoming a keen observer to the child's subtle signals, and responding to the meaning of these signals, you help the child make the connection that his sounds, looks and actions have meaning, and he can use them to achieve a specific purpose. In this way, he will be on the road to intentionality.

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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