

## Was that Intentional? Helping Young Children with Communication Delays Send Purposeful Messages

By: Lauren Lowry  
Hanan Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

“Intentionality” refers to a child’s ability to send messages on purpose, directly to someone to achieve a specific goal.

<b>Behaviour that is <u>not</u> intentional:</b>	<b>Intentional Behaviour:</b>
Child smiles when they see their favorite musical toy	Child smiles, then gives her favourite toy to dad so that he can turn it on

In the earliest stages of communication development, infants and young children with developmental delays communicate without realizing it. It’s the adult who attributes the meaning to what the child does. The child might:

- make sounds
- look at items they want
- use body movements or facial expressions to indicate their wants and needs

But they do not send these messages directly to anyone.

It can be very difficult to understand a child’s messages when they are subtle or not directed towards someone. But research has shown that, when the adults in a child’s life respond to a child’s subtle or non-intentional behaviour as if it has meaning, this promotes the development of intentional communication (Cress, 2014). When an adult responds to a child’s sound, facial expression and body movement as if it is sending a specific message, it helps the child make the connection that this behaviour has meaning to other people. For example, if a child turns away from food, the adult can say, “Oh you don’t like carrots!” Even if the child doesn’t understand what the adult said, over time, this kind of response helps children develop intentionality.

Once children make the connection that they can send messages directly to another person in order to achieve their “goal” on purpose, communication can really take off!

## References

Cress, C. (2014, March 24). Promoting Intentional Communication in Very Early Communicators: Matching Strategies to Potential Sources of Difficulty. Power point slides and presentation given at The Hanen Centre, Toronto: Ontario.

### 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](http://www.hanen.org).**

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