



When a Child Has a Language Delay, Research Shows That Parents Can Make a Big Difference!

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Many years ago, when a child had a language delay, parents took them to a speech language pathologist (SLP) who worked with him or her directly, while the parent observed. Parents were given some ideas for practice at home with their child, but the SLP was the main person providing the therapy.

Nowadays, we know there's a better way to help children. Parents know their child best and spend much more time with their child than an SLP can. So now, the main focus of language intervention with young children is to help parents learn to provide intervention in natural and enjoyable ways at home. In this kind of therapy, the SLP is more of a coach, helping parents learn strategies that build children's language skills, working with the parent to find activities that the child enjoys and brainstorming solutions to problems. We call this "parent-implemented intervention".

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Researchers have studied whether parents can be as effective as SLPs in improving a child's language skills and have shown that indeed they can. In fact, in some cases, children improve more when their parent is the main person providing the intervention! In the past decade, a few researchers have looked at a large number of studies to see if there were any patterns and trends with this type of intervention. Many of these studies have included research on Hanen Parent Programs, including the [It Takes Two to Talk® Program](#) and the [More Than Words® Program](#).

Here are some of the trends the researchers found:

- **Parents are either as effective or more effective than an SLP at helping their child**

In 2011, two researchers looked at the results from 18 different studies of young children with a variety of reasons for their language delay (different diagnoses) [1]. They found that, when parents learned to use strategies to help their child, the children's language skills improved, and they learned to communicate more often. In fact, children improved just as much when their parents provided the therapy as they did when it was provided by an SLP. Parent-implemented intervention resulted in even better comprehension and grammar than therapy from a professional.

- **When parents use naturalistic strategies with their child, their child's language skills improve.** Naturalistic strategies make use of everyday activities and routines in a child's life and involve the parent following the child's lead by responding to all of the child's attempts to communicate during these routines. These are the types of strategies used in the Hanen approach. A 2014 study looked at naturalistic language approaches and found that children's language skills improved when parents used these types of strategies [2].

- **Toddlers who are late to talk benefit when parents provide the therapy, and parents report a reduction in their stress.**

A 2017 study compared the effects of therapy given by SLPs versus parents [3]. Researchers looked at studies of children under the age of 3 who were late to start talking but didn't have any underlying reason for their language delay (they didn't have a diagnosis or other explanation for the delay). They found that children improved both when therapy was provided by a professional and by their own parent. However, in two studies, children's understanding of language seemed to benefit more from parent-implemented intervention! The other important finding from this study was that parents reported feeling less stressed after learning how to help their child.

- **A variety of children can benefit from this approach.**

A large review of 76 studies in 2019 included research on children with a variety of reasons for their language delay [4]. For some children, the cause was unknown (this is often referred to as "[Developmental Language Disorder](#)"); other children had diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorder, hearing loss, or developmental disability. Researchers found that children, regardless of their diagnosis, improved in their ability to communicate and interact when their parents provided the intervention. While all children benefitted, children with Developmental Language Disorder showed the biggest improvements.

- **Parents can use different activities to encourage their child's language skills.**

A recent review of 25 studies looked at several ways this approach affects children, including the type of activity parents use to build their child's language skills [5]. They compared whether sharing books with their child resulted in better language skills as compared to using strategies during play and everyday routines. They found that both types of activities were great ways to help children develop their language skills. This study also showed that, when parents use strategies that encourage language development, their children's expressive vocabulary and language skills improve.

As you can see, research shows that parents can be as effective (if not more effective) as SLPs when it comes to providing intervention for young children with language delay. If you are concerned about your child's language development and find an SLP who will help you learn to provide intervention to your child at home, what you learn will be really interesting and powerful! Hanen certified speech-language pathologists help you learn Hanen strategies that may seem simple (such as Observe, Wait and Listen; Follow your Child's Lead; Ask questions that continue the conversation; Highlight your language), but they are very effective. These strategies encourage your child to interact with you for longer periods of time, which is the foundation for language learning. They also help you talk to your child so that your language is at just the right level. The everyday interactions you have with your child provide countless opportunities for language learning. And you won't be alone in the process – your SLP will help and support you as you learn how to help your child reach his or her potential.

References

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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.

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