

### Program Rationale and Objective

The developmental progress of thousands of young children who attend child care or early education programs is determined by the quality and quantity of their interactions with their caregivers and educators. Ensuring children's optimal development in the areas of language and literacy depends, in large part, on the training of their educators (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 2002; Kontos, Howes, Shinn & Galinsky, 1995). *Learning Language and Loving It* — The Hanen Program for Early Childhood Educators/

Teachers, which addresses the urgent need for effective in-service education, focuses on linguistic responsiveness and equips educators to facilitate the language and emergent literacy development of all preschool-aged children. This includes those who are at risk for language delays, who have language disorders and who are learning English as a second language (Weitzman, Girolametto & Greenberg, 2006).

### Relationship between Linguistic Responsiveness and Quality of Early Education

Empirical studies have shown positive short- and long-term outcomes from children's participation in high quality child care and early education settings, in which children experience responsive and cognitively stimulating interactions with adults (for a review see Weitzman et al, 2006). In addition, high-quality child care experiences which feature responsive, stimulating environments provide a protective mechanism for children from disadvantaged home environments, resulting in higher scores on tests of language development and cognitive functioning compared with similar children without this kind of child care experience (Burchinal, Campbell, Bryant, Wasik & Ramey, 1997; McCartney, Dearing & Taylor, 2003).

LaGrange, 2000; Pianta, 2006). Studies suggest that educators' talk to children is often directive and unresponsive (Girolametto, Hoaken, van Lieshout & Weitzman, 2000a; Girolametto, Weitzman & van Lieshout, 2000b; Polyzoi, 1997; Schaffer & Liddell, 1984) and that educators spend little or no time in small group activity centres, which provide opportunities for increased teacher-child interaction (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Smith, 2001). In addition, a National Center for Early Development and Learning Pre-Kindergarten Study (Bryant, Clifford, Early & Little, 2005) revealed that children spend approximately 30% of their day either unengaged or waiting to complete daily routines.

Such findings indicate that there is an urgent need for early childhood educators to be equipped with the knowledge and skills that enable them to create responsive, cognitively enriched environments for all the children in their care.



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A considerable body of research, however, has demonstrated that the quality of early education settings in Canada and the United States is inadequate in terms of the kinds of interactions known to facilitate children's language and literacy development (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, Tougas &

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## Program Features

The *Learning Language and Loving It* Program is:

- delivered by a group leader with Hanen training (a speech-language pathologist or early childhood consultant) to a group of up to twenty educators
- intensive, with two major components:
  - ◆ 5-8 group training sessions (15-20 hours)
  - ◆ 4-6 individual videotaping and feedback sessions for each educator (educators’ interactions with children are videotaped by and reviewed with group leader)
  - ◆ supported by user-friendly resources: guidebook, workbooks, and a detailed leader’s guide for the group leader

## Theoretical Foundations

*Learning Language and Loving It* is based on social interactionist perspectives of development, which view the child’s acquisition of language, social skills, and emergent literacy within a framework of early caregiver-child interactions (Bohannon & Bonvillian, 1997). Program strategies are derived from sound research on the types of adult-child interaction that foster children’s language and literacy development, summarized as follows:

1. **Children develop language and emergent literacy through naturalistic interactions with the adults and children around them.**

The *Learning Language and Loving It* Program is based on the premise that educators can positively influence children’s acquisition of language and literacy through frequent, high quality interactions in which educators practice linguistic responsiveness. This

premise is supported by Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which views children’s learning “as a process of gradual mastery achieved through mediated practice and social interaction with adults . . .” (Weitzman et al, 2006, p. 129). Within these interactions, adults “scaffold” by adjusting the amount of support they provide in response to children’s existing skill levels, decreasing support in order to challenge children to perform at a higher level, but providing more support when children seem to be having difficulty (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001).

2. **Responsive language input is essential to children’s language development.**

The responsive language approach taught in the *Learning Language and Loving It* Program is based on the responsivity hypothesis, which suggests that responsive language input that builds upon the child’s focus or topic is more easily processed, thereby permitting the child to redirect more cognitive resources for language learning (for a summary see Girolametto & Weitzman, 2006). In addition, responsive language input may serve to increase the child’s motivation to interact and learn since, within these interactions, the child experiences a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness, all of which fuel intrinsic motivation (Grolnick, Deci & Ryan, 1997).

3. **Children benefit from being involved in extended interactions in which they are full and active participants.**

Too often in classrooms, children’s interactions with adults involve a brief question-response-evaluation format, providing few or no opportunities for language learning (Mehan, 1979; Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996).

Participation in extended interactions, however, enables children to practice and refine their communication skills, helps them learn the rules of conversations and provides educators with ongoing opportunities to model progressively more complex language and literacy concepts relevant to the children's topic (Weitzman et al, 2006).

#### 4. Children's exposure to a variety of vocabulary predicts vocabulary growth.

Dickinson (2001) found that the more opportunities children had to speak with their educators, the more varied vocabulary they were exposed to and the more advanced their vocabulary was on entering kindergarten. Other studies have also reported on the positive relationship between the number and variety of words children hear in their first few years and later achievements in verbal ability, receptive and expressive language, and school achievement (Hart & Risley, 1995; Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006).

#### 5. Exposure to decontextualized language in the context of everyday interactions is critical to children's language and literacy outcomes.

Children progress from "learning to talk" to "talking to learn", the latter being dependent on the ability to use decontextualized language, which is needed for the acquisition of literacy and, specifically, for story comprehension (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; van Kleeck, Vander Woude & Hammett, 2006). Children need to engage in extended discourse within which adults expose them to decontextualized language and oblige them to use language in more complex and abstract ways, in contexts removed from the here-and-now (Dickinson & Beals, 1994). Shared story book reading is an ideal context for exposing children to decontextualized language.

## Responsive Interaction Strategies

In the *Learning Language and Loving It* Program, educators learn to apply the following three clusters of responsive interaction strategies:

1. **Child-oriented strategies** encourage children to initiate and engage in conversational interactions so that educators can then provide responsive language input on the child's topic of interest – strategies include Observe, Wait and Listen; Be Face to Face; Follow the Child's Lead (Imitate, Interpret, Comment); Join In and Play.
2. **Interaction-promoting strategies** encourage extended, balanced conversations between educators and children in both one-to-one and small group interactions. This involves listening carefully to the children, tailoring responses to their interests and not dominating the conversation – strategies include Cue the Child to Take a Turn; Use a Variety of Questions to Encourage Conversation; Balance Comments and Questions; Scan Small Groups (carefully observe each child to facilitate her/his participation and interaction).
3. **Language-modeling strategies** build children's receptive and expressive language skills, as well as their emergent literacy knowledge by providing models of more advanced oral language and emergent literacy knowledge – strategies include Use a Variety of Labels (use nouns, verbs, adjectives and include unfamiliar words); Expand on What the Child Says; Extend the Topic (by modeling decontextualized language).

Weitzman et al, 2006; Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002

## *Learning Language and Loving It:* Effective In-Service Education

The most common type of in-service education or professional development typically offered to early childhood educators is a “one shot” workshop from a presenter with special expertise. Such workshops, however, are often ineffective since their brief format does not foster meaningful, long-term changes in educators’ knowledge or practice (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001).

*Learning Language and Loving It* is a group training program that fulfills the following requirements for effective in-service education, as described by Bowman, Donovan and Burns (2001) and Garet et al (2001):

1. **Continuous program of study, sustained over time** — *Learning Language and Loving It* involves approximately 25 hours of training over a 15-week period.
2. **Active participation of educators in the learning process** — group sessions include a variety of media and are structured so that learning is facilitated through interactive, experiential activities. These include small group problem-solving, videotape analysis and simulated practice activities, followed by discussion on implications for classroom implementation.
3. **Opportunities to apply knowledge in simulated and real-life situations** — educators practice strategies in simulated activities during both group sessions and everyday classroom activities, the latter being guided by specific plans developed during group sessions.
4. **On-site mentoring and coaching** — each educator is observed, videotaped and provided with on-site coaching and feedback by the group leader four to six times over the course of the 15-week program.
5. **Immediate feedback on educators’ application of their learning** — each educator receives feedback on her videotaped interactions from the group leader shortly after being filmed. The feedback involves reviewing the videotaped interaction in order to increase educators’ awareness of their own and the children’s interactive behavior and the interplay between the two, as well as to facilitate successful implementation of responsive strategies.
6. **Collective participation of educators from the same setting** — *Learning Language and Loving It* is usually offered to the entire staff at a child care centre or preschool program to promote systemic change in practice over time.



## Summary of Empirical Research

*Learning Language and Loving It* has been field tested and rigorously examined using randomized control trials. Its efficacy has been supported in a series of studies, for which the principal investigator was Dr. Luigi Girolametto, Associate Professor, Department of Speech-Language Pathology, University of Toronto:

### Study #1 *Efficacy study on the Learning Language and Loving It Program*

Area of investigation	This efficacy study investigated the impact of the <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program on educators' use of responsive interaction strategies and on concomitant changes in the children's verbal participation.
Experimental group	8 educators — randomly assigned by child care centre to participate in a 14 week <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program (8 group training sessions, 6 individual video feedback sessions).
Control group	8 educators – randomly assigned by child care centre to a no treatment control group and who received the <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program after the posttest.

Following their participation in the *Learning Language and Loving It* Program, educators' talkativeness, language complexity and interactive behaviour were analyzed in two contexts (book reading and play dough) and compared with that of the control group.

Results of these analyses are as follows:

- In the book reading activity, educators in the experimental group were significantly more talkative than the control group. In addition, they read the text less often, using the book as a means of facilitating conversation. They waited for children to initiate conversation and encouraged more conversational turn-taking than did the educators in the control group.
- During the play dough activity, educators in the experimental group engaged in more face-to-face interaction and used the "SCAN" strategy more often than the control group.
- These changes were maintained over the 9-month follow up period without any further training.

The changes in the educators' interactive behaviour after participating in the *Learning Language and Loving It* Program training program had a significant and positive effect on

the children's language productivity. A posttest comparison between children in the control group and the experimental group, showed that, in both play dough and book reading activities, the experimental group used more utterances and more multiword combinations and engaged in more peer interaction than children in the control group.

### *Implications*

The increased verbal productivity of the children in the experimental group is an important finding because it shows that, when educators learn to facilitate conversation, children increase their spontaneous output not only to their teachers, but also to their peers. In addition, because the children in the experimental group used more multiword utterances, it can be assumed that responsive teachers enable children to participate more fully in conversations and to demonstrate the kind of language complexity of which they are capable. According to the social interactionist theory of language acquisition, increased verbal productivity on the part of the child creates the ideal context for language growth because it elicits more feedback and conversation from others, thereby allowing the child to engage in more practice in the use of language and to obtain more feedback on his language use from both adults and peers (Bohannon & Bonvillian, 1997).

**Study #2** *Investigation of the impact of a modified Learning Language and Loving Program on educators' support of children's peer interactions*

Area of investigation	This study examined the effects of a modified <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program that provides in-service education to child care staff on promoting positive peer interactions among preschool children.
Experimental group	8 educators — randomly assigned by child care centre to participate in a modified <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program, which included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ four group training sessions on facilitating peer interaction using verbal peer support strategies; and</li> <li>■ two videotaping and feedback sessions</li> </ul>
Control group	9 educators — randomly assigned by child care centre to an alternative modified <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program, which included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ four group training sessions on strategies for enhancing adult-child interactions within small groups, with no content on peer support strategies; and</li> <li>■ two videotaping and feedback sessions</li> </ul>

The following results were obtained when use of verbal supports by educators in the experimental group post-program was compared with the control group.

**Educators in the experimental group:**

- used a significantly higher number of verbal supports for peer interaction overall as well as a higher percentage of verbal supports when calculated as a percentage of all utterances
- significantly increased their use of the verbal peer support strategy “Facilitate Communication”, which includes interpreting a child’s utterance by rephrasing or restating it to another child (e.g., “I think Sean means that he wants to help you build the tower.”) or prompting children to talk to one another (e.g., “Tell Maria to give you some play dough.”)
- significantly increased their use of the verbal support strategy “Peer Referral”, which invites children to interact with or help one another (e.g., “Tafik, help Nina fix the truck.”)
- maintained their use of verbal peer support strategies when evaluated four months post program

An analysis of the **responses of the children in the experimental group** to their child care providers’ use of verbal support strategies compared with the control group showed that:

- they initiated a significantly greater number of peer interactions
- they received a significantly greater number of topic-continuing responses from their peers
- Facilitates Communication and Peer Referrals were the two verbal support strategies that were most successful in encouraging children to interact with a peer

**Implications**

This study demonstrates that educators’ participation in a modified *Learning Language and Loving It* Program can increase the overall frequency of peer interaction. The implications of these findings are very positive since, by virtue of having more conversations with peers, children gain more practice using language as well as receiving feedback on what they have communicated. In addition, increased peer interaction provides more opportunities for children to develop the kinds of skills required to negotiate successful language-based social interactions.

### Study #3 *Investigation of the impact of the Learning Language and Loving It Program on educators' use of strategies which promote early literacy skills*

Area of investigation	<p>This study examined the effects of the <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program on educators' use of the following strategies during interactive book reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ utterances that enhance story comprehension and abstract thinking</li> <li>■ utterances that highlight components of narrative structure such as the setting, problem/response, action/attempt etc.; and</li> <li>■ print and letter-sound references</li> </ul> <p>The study also examined the children's resulting verbal engagement with their educators.</p>
Experimental group	<p>8 educators were randomly assigned by child care centre to the experimental group. They attended the 14 week <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program (8 group training sessions, 6 individual video feedback sessions). One 2.5-hour group session and video feedback session were devoted to interactive book reading, in which educators learned to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ promote the use of abstract, decontextualized language;</li> <li>■ expose the children to more complex stories and highlight key components of narrative structure; and</li> <li>■ introduce print concepts such as "illustrator" and "title" and promote print awareness while reading the story</li> </ul>
Control group	<p>8 educators were randomly assigned to the control group by child care centre, and received no training during the experimental phase. They received in-service training after the posttest.</p>

The following results were obtained when use of abstract utterances, utterances that highlighted narrative structure and print references by educators in the experimental group was compared with the control group.

At posttest, **educators in the experimental group significantly increased their use of:**

- abstract utterances that utilized children's "world" knowledge and experiences, which constituted Level 3 on a continuum of abstraction from Level 1 (picture description) to Level 4 (utterances that promote analysis and evaluation of story events); and
- utterances that highlighted the "action" components of narrative structure – i.e., related to an attempt by the main character to resolve the problem

At posttest, **children in the experimental group** provided twice as many responses as the control group to the educators' abstract utterances. In addition, the responses of the children in the experimental group "included content that was at a higher level of abstraction (i.e., they took the

character's perspective, made judgments, related personal experiences connected to the story...)" (Flowers, Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2007, p. 14).

At follow-up, some of the educators did not maintain their posttest changes, which suggests the need for more intensive training and support in order for educators to integrate literacy-promoting skills into their interactive repertoires.

#### *Implications*

The positive impact of the educators' increased use of abstract utterances on the children's interaction and abstract language use during book reading confirms the importance of exposing children to more complex language in the context of conversational interaction. In addition to creating more opportunities for children to practice language forms and receive feedback on their messages, the use of abstract language has been associated with better decontextualized language skills and story comprehension abilities in the school years (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton & McGrath, 1997; van Kleeck, Vander Woude & Hammett, 2006).

**Study #4** *Feasibility study on the effects of in-service education derived from the Learning Language and Loving It Program to promote emergent literacy*

Area of investigation	<p>This study investigated the effects of a 2-day in-service education program, derived from the <i>Learning Language and Loving It</i> Program, on educators' use of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) abstract language during story book reading</li> <li>ii) verbal print references during a post-story craft activity</li> </ul> <p>The study also examined the frequency of children's responses to educators' abstract language use and verbal print references.</p>
Experimental group	<p>8 educators were randomly assigned to the experimental group. Their 2-day in-service education program consisted of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Day 1 – strategies relating to the facilitation of child initiations, turn-taking and general language development</li> <li>■ Day 2 – strategies to promote children's emergent literacy skills – i.e., increasing use of decontextualized language and verbal references to print</li> </ul>
Control group	<p>8 educators were randomly assigned to the control group. Day 1 of their in-service education program was the same as that of the experimental group. Day 2 was on facilitating peer interaction.</p>

The following results were obtained when comparing the **outcomes of the experimental versus the control group**:

- Educators' use of abstract utterances was classified into four levels of abstraction, from concrete (level 1) to highly abstract (level 4). At posttest, educators in the experimental group significantly increased their use of Level 3 utterances that invited children to make connections between the story and their personal experiences and emotions
- educators in the experimental group increased their use of print references during a post-story craft activity to highlight letters, sound-letter correspondences and word concepts
- children in the experimental group increased their rate of decontextualized responses to educators' Level 3 utterances and their references to print when responding contingently to those of their educators

### *Implications*

Children's contingent responses to their educators' Level 3 utterances can potentially increase their educators' subsequent contingent responses containing abstract utterances and print references, thereby contributing to further learning. In addition, responding to verbal print references may serve to prime children for formal literacy instruction (Justice & Ezell, 2004). Follow up studies are needed to determine whether educators maintained their skills and whether the short-term impact on children's responses had an impact on their literacy outcomes over time.



## Conclusion

*Learning Language and Loving It* is a research-validated, state-of-the-art in-service education program that addresses the critical role of the early childhood educator in facilitating children's social, language and literacy skills during everyday interactions. Drawing from the most current research in the field of early childhood education, language development and adult learning, *Learning Language and Loving It* promotes responsive, developmentally appropriate interactions that are associated with positive language and literacy outcomes for young children.

## About the Researchers

**Dr. Luigi Girolametto** is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Speech-Language Pathology at the University of Toronto. His teaching and research focus on language development and intervention for young children. Research interests include the efficacy of language intervention, prevention of language disorders, and promotion of language and literacy skills in childcare centers and preschools.

**Elaine Weitzman, M.Ed** is a speech-language pathologist and executive director of The Hanen Centre. She is also Adjunct Professor in the University of Toronto's Speech-Language Pathology Department. For over 30 years, Ms. Weitzman has been involved in the development of Hanen Programs, which are disseminated worldwide through workshops for speech-language pathologist and other practitioners. She is the creator of the *Learning Language and Loving It* program and the co-author of the *Learning Language and Loving It* (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002) and *It Takes Two to Talk* (Pepper & Weitzman, 2004) guidebooks. She has collaborated extensively with Dr. Luigi Girolametto on research projects, which examined the promotion of language and literacy skills in early education settings and the efficacy of Hanen Programs. This extensive body of research has informed speech-language pathologists' practice in relation to working with parents and educators and has been widely published.

**Janice Greenberg, B.Sc., D.S.P.**, is a speech-language pathologist and was Program Director for Early Childhood Education Services at The Hanen Centre for 22 years from 2000 to 2022. A co-author of the guidebook, *Learning Language and Loving It* (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002), Ms. Greenberg led Hanen Programs and provided training to teachers and speech-language pathologists worldwide on how to effectively apply the Hanen approach to support the language, social and literacy development of preschool children. Ms. Greenberg worked clinically with preschoolers and their families and educators for over 25 years. She was also actively involved in evaluating the impact of Hanen Programs and is the co-author of several research studies.

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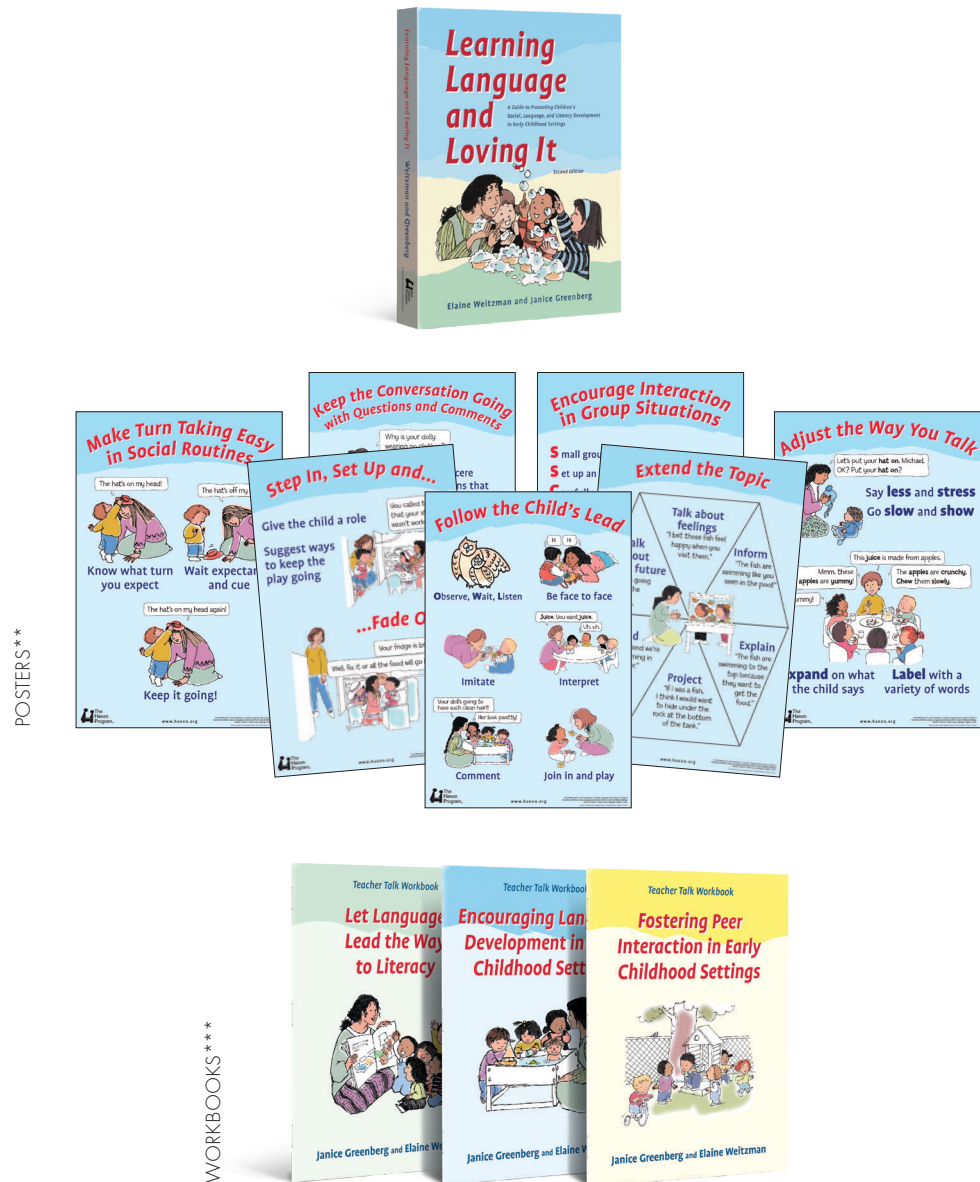
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## Available *Learning Language and Loving It* Resources

For more information, contact The Hanen Centre or visit us online at [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org)



- \* Available in English, French, Polish and Danish.
- \*\* Available in English, French and Spanish.
- \*\*\* Available in English, French, Spanish and Danish.

### Helping You Help Children Communicate

The Hanen Centre is a not-for-profit charitable organization devoted to helping parents become their child's most important language teacher. We train speech-language pathologists to engage, support and coach parents and educators to develop the skills to effectively foster young children's early language, social communication and literacy development within natural everyday activities. This includes children with or at risk of language delays, young autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.

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