



# The Chat Room Program

Providing a Language-Rich Environment to Stimulate the  
Preschool Child's Speech and Language Development

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# Executive Summary

## About First Words

First Words Preschool Speech and Language Program of Ottawa is an integrated partnership between a group of local agencies who provide speech and language services to preschool children (birth to eligibility to senior kindergarten). Each agency provides information, awareness, early identification and/or treatment services. These agencies include:

- ❖ Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre (PQCHC - Lead agency)
- ❖ Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO)
- ❖ Ottawa Children's Treatment Centre (OCTC)
- ❖ Ottawa Public Health Information Line (OPHIL)
- ❖ Andrew Fleck Children's Services (AFCS)

First Words is funded through a provincial initiative wherein the Government of Ontario has recognized that many preschool children have difficulties with speech and language development. In fact, 10%-12% of preschool children are at risk of a speech and/or language delay.

Unfortunately, many children are not identified until they reach school age. Studies show that the earlier children receive treatment, the better the results. Early identification and awareness of speech and language problems continue to be one of the main goals of First Words' outreach to parents, Family Educators, Early Childhood Educators, Health Care providers and the community in general.

## **What is *The Chat Room Program*?**

*The Chat Room Program* is a low-ratio, community-based program developed in partnership between the First Words Preschool Speech and Language Program of Ottawa and the Ontario Early Years Centre – Ottawa West-Nepean.

This manual provides information and daily strategies to create language-rich early learning and care environments to support the preschool child's communication development.

*The Chat Room Program* does not provide clinical speech-language services in any way. It does not take the place of clinical speech-language therapy performed by a certified Speech-Language Pathologist. Should you have concerns regarding a child's speech and/or language development, please refer families to local services so they can access an assessment.

## **Why was *The Chat Room Program* created?**

The program was created to support the growing number of families who have concerns regarding their child's speech and language development, social communication, and/or who may be waiting to receive clinical services. The low-ratio group provides increased opportunities to observe the child's social or communication skills and challenges, provides parents with examples and strategies to support their child's current communication skills and increases the parent's knowledge of communication development and community resources.

Research shows that approximately 1 in 10 preschool children are at risk of a speech and/or language delay. Early intervention is critical in supporting children to meet their full communication potential.

## **Who will benefit from *The Chat Room Program*?**

Parents, caregivers, and educators can benefit from this program. This manual provides information on speech-language development as well as how to create a language-rich environment that supports the preschool child's (0-5yrs) communication development.

For more information on creating a language-rich environment, refer to page 12 of this manual.

## What are the goals of *The Chat Room Program*?

For parents:

- To increase understanding of communication milestones in the preschool years and their importance for later success at school and in life.
- To increase awareness of attachment, communication opportunities and daily strategies to support their child's speech and language development.
- To practice strategies for language development in order to incorporate them into daily routines at home.
- To increase the confidence of both themselves and the child to reduce barriers to participation in community-based early learning programs.
- To increase awareness of community resources that supports their child's development in order to better advocate for the needs of their child.
- To increase connections with other families in their neighborhood in order to create a network of support for the family.

For educators:

- To increase knowledge on preschool speech and language milestones to better support early identification and referral to community services.
- To plan activities to enhance the learning environment in order to support speech and language development.
- To increase awareness of opportunities for communication development in an early learning and care environment or playgroup setting.
- To assist families in identifying how their child currently communicates and assisting families in scaffolding the child's communication development.
- To support parents in learning strategies to use with their child during everyday activities in order to increase attachment and communication opportunities.
- To increase the confidence of both the parent and child to reduce barriers to participate in community-based early learning programs.
- To increase knowledge and confidence in creating a language rich environment.
- To incorporate the strategies in *The Chat Room Program* into regular daily programming in order to build the communication skills of all children attending their program.

## **How can *The Chat Room Program* manual be used?**

*The Chat Room Program* manual can be used to facilitate a low-ratio, pre-registered community-based playgroup for preschool-aged children and their parents. Using the manual to facilitate a pre-registered program allows the families to build on their skills each week of the program and will yield better communication results as both children and parents become increasingly engaged with each subsequent week.

*The Chat Room Program* consists of 1 parent education workshop (2 hours) followed by 6 weekly parent/child sessions (2 hours each).

The strategies within the program can easily be incorporated and modeled on a daily basis, during regular programming, to enhance the learning environment and promote the development of speech and language within an existing playgroup setting or early learning and care program.

Facilitators can choose to:

1. Use *The Chat Room Program* as it is listed in this manual
2. Incorporate the strategies of each session into their regular daily programming.

## **What *The Chat Room Program* is not.**

*The Chat Room Program* is not an intervention program or therapy and is not designed to address a child's speech and language delay or their specific difficulties. If a speech and language delay is suspected, a timely referral to a speech-language pathologist should be made. Parents of children with a speech and language delay are welcome to attend *The Chat Room Program* and build on the child's current skills through general communication strategies.

For more information on local preschool speech and language services in Ontario call 211 or visit:

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/locations.aspx>

## Suggested Budget for *The Chat Room Program*

Item	Approx. Cost	Notes
Program set-up (if applicable*) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Rental space, staffing, transportation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Weekly craft supplies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Toys and equipment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Photocopying (handouts, forms, etc.)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Backpacks for the children</li> </ul>	* * * * * \$50.00	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;">           * indicates costs of typical programming, not included in the suggested budget.         </div> Available from the dollar store for approx. \$4.00-\$5.00 each
<i>The Chat Room Program</i> Parent Workshop <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> </ul>	\$15.00	
Week 1: Allowing your child to take the lead <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework giveaway – play dough</li> </ul>	\$10.00 \$10.00	Fruit, cheese, crackers, water Individual play dough from dollar store or homemade
Week 2: Allowing your child to take the lead <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework giveaway – ball</li> </ul>	\$10.00 \$10.00	Fruit, cheese, crackers, water Individual ball from dollar store
Week 4: Imitating and interpreting to build communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework giveaway – scarf</li> </ul>	\$10.00 \$15.00	Fruit, cheese, crackers, water Dance/play scarf (available on Amazon.ca – 15 scarves for \$8.98 <a href="https://www.amazon.com/dp/B06XDGWTHX">https://www.amazon.com/dp/B06XDGWTHX</a>
Week 3: Tempting your child to communicate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework giveaway – wind-up toy</li> </ul>	\$10.00 \$36.00	Fruit, cheese, crackers, water Available at dollar store (seasonal) or on <a href="http://www.amazon.ca">www.amazon.ca</a> – 4 toys for \$8.99
Week 5: Building communication through turn-taking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework giveaway – 4oz bubbles</li> </ul>	\$10.00 \$8.00	Fruit, cheese, crackers, water Available at dollar store or on <a href="http://www.amazon.ca">www.amazon.ca</a> – 12 pack for \$8.00
Week 6: Celebrating success and review of all weekly strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snack</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework giveaway – Homemade sensory book or felt story</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Photo book</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Printing of photos from the program</li> </ul>	\$20.00 \$30.00 \$20.00 \$20.00	Fruit, cheese, crackers, cake, water  4x6 – approx 24 pages available at dollar store, Michaels or <a href="http://www.amazon.ca">www.amazon.ca</a> Walmart
<b>Total cost:</b>	<b>\$310.00</b>	

Shopping in advance is beneficial as many of the items can be purchased at the dollar store but may only be available seasonally.



# Why is Speech and Language So Important?

Language is the greatest predictor of a child's success later in school and, in life.

Communication starts at birth; well before words begin. Over time, babies become more aware of the world around them and they start to understand the language they hear every day. Babies send all kinds of messages through cries, sounds, gestures and words.

Most children will build their speech and language skills with ease but some children will not. One out of ten preschool children will have speech and language problems that can make it hard for them to succeed in school and in life.

*“Communication development may be the best indicator of  
a developmental delay.”*

*(Wetherby & Prizant, 1996)*

A language delay may be the first indication that a child is not developing typically and/or reflect delays in other domains such as socio-emotional, cognitive, motor, or sensory.

Approximately 10% of all preschool children have a speech and language disorder in the absence of a sensory, cognitive and/or neurological impairment. These delays are approximately 2-3 times more common in boys than in girls. **Many of these children first present as late talking toddlers.**

## How do children communicate?

- ✓ Looking (using their eyes)
- ✓ Pointing and reaching
- ✓ Moving their body
- ✓ Making noises such as screams, babbling, crying
- ✓ Laughing
- ✓ Copying and mimicking others
- ✓ Putting sounds together
- ✓ Words
- ✓ Combining words and making sentences



To communicate well, children need:

- **Receptive Language or Comprehension Skills.** The ability to understand what someone else has said.
- **Expressive Language.** The building of a vocabulary of words in order to put them together to express thoughts and ideas.
- **Clear Speech Sound Production.** This is how we form sounds and are able to put them together into words that listeners can understand.
- **Social Communication.** Wanting to communicate with others is important in everyday life.

## Risk factors for speech and language delays

\*This is not a complete list of all risk factors that may affect speech and language development in preschoolers.

- **Environment:** A child's environment includes their physical surroundings and routines. Children need to hear and practice using language. In an environment with no chance to communicate, children are at a risk for a speech and language delay.
- **Health:** Children need to be healthy to learn language well. They may not communicate as often if they are not feeling well.
- **Hearing Difficulties:** Children need to hear language to learn it. Even a temporary hearing loss associated with an ear infection can have an impact on communication development. When a child has an ear infection, fluid collects inside the ear, behind the eardrum. The fluid can change the way they hear sounds and words. If a child has many ear infections, it can increase the risk of a speech or language delay.
- **Family History:** Speech and language delays often run in the family. If a parent, grandparent, brother, sister or other family member has had a delay, your child may be at a higher risk of a delay.
- **Prematurity:** Prematurity is when a child is born before 37 weeks of the pregnancy are completed. Children born prematurely are at risk for a speech and language delay.

The following are **NOT** risk factors for a speech and/or language delay.

- **Learning More Than One Language:** Speech and language milestones should be met at the expected times, even if children are learning more than one language.
- **Tongue-Tie:** A tongue-tie is when a small piece of skin under the tongue, the lingual frenulum, is shorter or thicker than expected. This can limit movement of the tongue. In some situations, a tongue-tie can impact how a child feeds and swallows, but the tongue can adapt to make the small movements needed for speech sounds.
- **Laziness:** Children want to communicate with people around them. If they are not communicating, it is most likely because they are not quite ready or it is hard for them to do.

## Early identification of suspected speech and language delays

*“Ages 0 to 3 provides the greatest window of opportunity to affect neurological and behavioral growth and impact.”*

*(Rossetti, 2001)*

It is important to take note that parents, as well as professionals, should avoid the “wait and see” approach. Early identification starts with knowing and evaluating the child’s early language predictors.

Early intervention may:

- provide better and faster outcomes for the child
- prevent a cumulative delay
- prevent or decrease the severity of language delays in preschoolers
- enhance school readiness
- increase later academic success in school

# The Importance of a Language-Rich Environment

## What is a language-rich environment?

Language-rich environments include the home, childcare settings and any places families may visit. The people children spend time with, and the activities they do, contribute to language-rich environments. To make experiences language-rich, parents and caregivers create opportunities for talking and listening with their children. Language-rich activities rely on the adult nurturing and responding positively to how the child is communicating.

## How can parents and caregivers create language-rich environments?

Parents and caregivers play an important role in their child's speech and language development. Children hear and learn language every day. Adults provide children with a variety of opportunities to communicate at home and in the community. Parents and caregivers can help children learn language by talking about what the child is doing, touching, tasting, seeing and hearing. They help by playing and doing everyday activities together.



# Communication Strategies to Support a Language-Rich Environment

## **Speak in the child's first language**

When a child acquires strong language skills in their mother-tongue, it helps them learn a new language. Encourage parents to speak with their child in their mother-tongue. Parents provide more frequent and better models when they are a fluent and comfortable speaker of a language.

## **Be face-to-face and at the child's level**

Watching your facial expressions help them understand the meaning of your words and is a great way to get the child's attention. A child needs to see how to form the sounds in the words others are saying. They will also be watching how you move your mouth, lips, and tongue to try and imitate the sounds you are making.

## **Watch, WAIT and listen for the child to respond**

Watch the child's body language for signs that they are engaged in the conversation. After asking a question or giving them a task, wait at least 10 seconds for them to respond. Children need time to make sense of the words they are hearing, decide how (or if) they will respond and then, try to communicate with their sounds, gestures or words. This takes time!

Adults often repeat the question too quickly; before the child has been able to respond. Be patient and keep eye contact with the child. If the child is looking at you, it's a good sign that they are processing the information they have just heard. If they look away, repeat your question and add a gesture to help them understand what you are asking.

## Label items

As you go through daily routines, talk about what you and your child are doing and what you see. Children are always listening. Emphasize the key words to help the child pay attention to the labels. Labeling helps give them context to your words and builds vocabulary. Remember to wait and give the child the opportunity to repeat the word or words.

Families are encouraged to name items by their “real” name instead of using “baby talk”. For example, use the word “blanket” instead of “blankie”.

**Example 1:** for children who are not using words or using only a few words

**Scenario:** It is bath time. The parent just poured some bubble bath into the water.

**Parent:** “Bubbles.” Waits. “Look at the **bubbles.**” Wait. “Lots of **bubbles.**”

**Example 2:** for a child who is using single words and combining a few words together

**Scenario:** The child is building towers with blocks.

**Parent:** “That’s a **tall tower.**” Wait.

## Imitate

Echoing the child’s words or vocalizations and copying their gestures helps them learn from others, express their interests, share emotions and promotes turn-taking to build and practice their skills. Do what the child does, say what the child says.

Imitating helps:

- ✓ you connect with the child more easily
- ✓ the child know that you are interested in what they are saying and doing
- ✓ give the child a chance to imitate you



## Interpret what the child is trying to communicate

Children with limited words will communicate with sounds and gestures. Listen and try to interpret what they are saying and name it. Look around and use the environment to help find clues. This will help you uncover what the child wants to say.

Repeat what the child is trying to communicate by saying it back to them clearly and slowly. Give the child a good, clear model of how the words should sound, without calling attention to the error.

### **Example 1:**

**Child:** “ba” and points to a bird in the sky.      **Parent:** “*Bird*. Yes, there’s a **bird**!”

### **Example 2:**

**Child:** Reaches for juice and grunts “ah-ah”

**Parent:** Interprets that child wants juice and says, “**Juice**. I want **Juice**.”  
The parent then pours the child a cup of juice.

### **Example 3:**

**Child:** Screams and begins to cry when the parent presents a book at bedtime.

**Parent:** Interprets that the child does not want to read a book and says, “**No book!**”  
The parent then offers the child a different book to read or presents a different night time activity.

When repeating and emphasizing a word back to the child clearly and slowly, maintain eye contact with them. This will cue them to attempt to repeat the word again. If the child chooses to not repeat the word, continue the activity by inserting the word as often as possible during natural conversation. Do not insist that the child repeat the word.

Children are quite good at letting adults know if their message has been understood. If you did not interpret correctly, try again. Words are not always easy to understand as children develop their speech and language. You may not always be able to ‘uncover’ each message.

The most important thing is that you try. Let them know that you are listening. When possible, try to get the child to show you what they are talking about. This will help with their frustration, allows them to get their message across and shows that you are listening and trying to understand. Try to distract them with another activity to reduce the frustration.



## Add a word and repeat words often

Children build their communication over time. To help children put their words together to create longer phrases or sentences, repeat what the child says and, add a word.

### Example:

Child: “truck”

Parent: “**big** truck” or “**the green** truck”

Repeating what the child has said and adding a word, helps confirm that their message was understood and allows the adult to model longer phrases or sentences. Continue to find ways to add the child’s word into natural conversations to help them practice putting words together.

### Example:

Child: “ball”

parent: “**A big** ball.”

Parent: “**It’s a red** ball.”

Parent: “**Can you throw the red** ball?”

Parent: “**Let’s find another** ball.”



## Offer choices

Having a choice between two items or activities give the child a sense of independence and promotes communication. Offering choices allow the adult to label the items by name which helps to build the child’s vocabulary, model how to produce the sounds and, allows the child to communicate their choice.

A child, who is able to produce words, may use them when making their choice. In the absence of words, the child will communicate with sounds or gestures such as pointing or reaching for the item. In this case, the adult can acknowledge the child’s choice by naming the item once more before giving it to them. Repetition is important. The more a child hears a word (and watches you say it), the more likely they are to use it.

## Be a good model and talk all day, every day

Children need to hear language to use it. The more the adults around them talk, the more vocabulary they hear and the more they learn how to communicate with others.



### **The 30 Million Word Gap (*Hart and Risley Study*)**

The amount of different words children hear by age 3 is directly related to reading skills at age 9.

At age 3, children in more talkative families:

- ✓ hear 30 million more words than children in less talkative families
- ✓ get more praise and encouragements which impacts the child's language level
- ✓ do better in vocabulary, language, reading and school tests at age 9

*To close the 30 million word gap, be sure to listen more, talk more, read more, and praise more.  
Help children avoid the gap!*

## Tools to Stimulate Language Development

### Songs and finger plays

Children are naturally drawn to music. Many songs and finger plays are repetitive and provide gestures along with much vocabulary. Songs can help children through difficult transition times, can distract from other activities and can also encourage children to participate in early learning activities. Children love repetition and will ask to sing the same song over and over again. This repetition is important to help build their vocabulary, confidence, and participation. Each time you repeat the song, children will increase their participation!

Singing songs allows children of all ages to participate! Children without words, who don't know the words or who may lack the confidence to sing, may participate with their gestures. Singing at a slower pace allows toddlers to participate with actions while encouraging older children to sing along.



## Read and tell stories

Books provide visual images to help capture a child's attention as well as help them understand the words that are being read. Books can be helpful for parents who find it difficult or unnatural to talk throughout the day with their child. It provides them with a script to read or they can simply tell their own story by looking at the pictures in the book.

Keep reading fun! If a child is having difficulty sitting for an entire story, stop reading the words and watch your child to see what may be catching their attention; talk about that. Going off-script may not always be comfortable for the adult but allows the child to be involved in telling the story. This also allows the adult to shorten the story based on the child's attention span or, tell the story in any language!

Don't be afraid to close the book. If the child is not interested in reading a book, close it up and try again later.



## Build communication through play

Play builds language. Through games, a child seeks out a playmate, follows a set of rules, negotiates, takes turns, cooperates and accepts an outcome at the end. All those skills are closely linked to communication.

- ✓ Get down on the floor, get a toy and copy what the child is doing. Add words and make up stories as you play together or next to each other.
- ✓ Get the child's attention by being playful, using an excited voice, sounds, gestures and facial expressions.
- ✓ Turn daily routines into fun. Talk about what you are doing and what you see throughout the day. Invite the child to help with daily tasks such as wiping tables, passing out props at circle time or napkins at snack time.
- ✓ Use pretend play.
  - Model simple pretend actions (e.g., feed a doll, battle a monster).
  - Turn a life situation into a pretend game (e.g. the child has hurt her knee, call in the "body part store" and order a new knee, size 3. Have it delivered and tip the delivery man.).
  - Reverse the roles (e.g. pretend to be a child who doesn't want to go to bed. Let the child pretend to be the parent.).
- ✓ Play sound and word games - Get silly with sounds ("Sam soon saw the sun.") and rhyming games ("Matt the cat").



# Screen Time and Language Development

## Limit the use of screen time

*‘Screen time’ refers to time spent with any screen, including smart phones, tablets, television, video games, computers or wearable technology.*

Media is everywhere! It can be hard to limit a child’s exposure to these devices but children need to be active partners in their communication development and practice comes in the form of human interaction.

It is unknown how early exposure to screen time or media changes the developing brain, and, published research on the amount of time and how children under 5 years of age actually learn from screens is limited.

*“There is solid evidence that infants and toddlers have difficulty transferring new learning from a 2D representation to a 3D object (e.g., from screen to real life) and are unlikely to learn from TV at this age. By contrast, they learn intensely through face-to-face interaction with parents and caregivers. Early learning is easier, more enriching and developmentally more efficient when experienced live, interactively, in real time and space, and with real people.” <sup>1</sup>*

Preschool children learn best (i.e., in expressive and vocabulary terms) from live, direct and dynamic interactions with caring adults. <sup>2</sup>

## What are the risks associated with screen time?

Some studies have associated extended exposure to TV negatively affects how children under 5 years of age acquire and use language, their attention, cognitive development and executive function. It has also been associated with lower cognitive abilities, especially related to short-term memory, early reading and math skills.

Extended exposure also reduces the amount and quality of parent-child interactions and distracts from play.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world, (The Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Linebarger DL, Walker D. Infants’ and toddlers’ television viewing and language outcomes. American Behavioral Scientist, 2005; 48(5):624-45.



## Minimizing screen time

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to minimize the use of screen time for young children, especially infants and toddlers, due to some developmental risks and no proven benefits identified.

By minimizing screen time, children can engage in more face-to-face interactions with others which are important for language development, self-regulation and creative thinking.

*“Children younger than 5 years old require active play and quality family time to develop essential life skills, such as language, self-regulation and creative thinking. Regardless of age, children should not have to compete with screens for parental attention.”<sup>4</sup>*

## Recommended screen time for children

The Canadian Pediatric Society recommends:

Under 2 years of age	Not recommended
2 to 5 years of age	Less than 1 hour per day
Over 5 years of age	No more than 2 hours per day

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<sup>3</sup> Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world, (The Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world, (The Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017)

## Strategies to support language development during screen time

- ✓ Sit with the child to talk about what they are seeing and interested in.
- ✓ Relate the information they are seeing onscreen to past experiences or their knowledge. (e.g. if they are seeing an airplane flying onscreen; talk about the airplane you saw at the airport)
- ✓ Bring information from the screen into the real world. (e.g. if the child saw a garbage truck onscreen, point out a truck on garbage day and remind them about the one seen on the TV, tablet)
- ✓ Ensure there are 'screen-free' times during the day, especially during family meals.
- ✓ Turn off screens when not in use and avoid background TV.
- ✓ Avoid screen time for at least one hour before bedtime so that sleep is not affected.

**Screen Time**



**No Screen Time**





## Communication Milestones

Although children do develop at their own rhythm, children are expected to meet the following minimum speech and language milestones by the age listed. Should a child not be meeting their expected milestones, it is important not to “wait and see” if the child will acquire the skills in the coming days, weeks or months. Families are encouraged to seek out a speech and language assessment as soon as their child is not meeting the required milestones.

In order to acquire the skills needed to communicate with those around them, children need quality relationships and experiences from others around them. Knowing the milestones will help you prepare age-appropriate activities and scaffold the child’s communication development.

Adults should encourage children to communicate by using their body language, sounds, gestures or words. Children must practice repeatedly to master the skills needed to communicate.

### By 6 months...

- ✓ turns to the source of sounds
- ✓ startles in response to sudden, loud noises
- ✓ makes different cries for different needs (e.g., I’m hungry, I’m tired)
- ✓ watches your face as you talk
- ✓ smiles and laughs in response to your smiles and laughs
- ✓ imitates coughs or other sounds (e.g., ah, eh, buh)

### By 9 months...

- ✓ responds to his/her name
- ✓ responds to the telephone ringing or a knock at the door
- ✓ understands being told “no”
- ✓ gets what he/she wants through sounds and gestures (e.g., reaching to be picked up)
- ✓ plays social games with you (e.g., peek-a-boo)
- ✓ enjoys being around people
- ✓ babbles and repeats sounds (e.g., babababa, duhduhduh)

### **By 12 months...**

- ✓ follows simple one-step directions (e.g., “sit down”)
- ✓ looks across the room to something you point to
- ✓ uses three or more words
- ✓ uses gestures to communicate (e.g., waves “bye bye”, shakes head “no”)
- ✓ gets your attention using sounds, gestures and pointing while looking at your eyes
- ✓ brings toys to show you
- ✓ “performs” for attention and praise
- ✓ combines lots of sounds as though talking (e.g., abada baduh abee)
- ✓ shows interest in a simple picture book

### **By 18 months...**

- ✓ understands the concepts of “in and out”, “off and on”
- ✓ points to several body parts when asked
- ✓ uses at least 20 words
- ✓ responds with words or gestures to simple questions (e.g., “Where’s teddy?”, “What’s that?”)
- ✓ demonstrates some pretend play with toys (e.g., gives teddy a drink)
- ✓ makes at least four different consonant sounds (e.g., b, n, d, g, w, h)
- ✓ enjoys being read to and looking at simple books with you
- ✓ points to pictures using one finger

### **By 24 months...**

- ✓ follows two-step directions (e.g., “Go find your teddy bear and show it to Grandma”)
- ✓ uses 100 or more words
- ✓ uses at least two pronouns (e.g., “you”, “me”, “mine”)
- ✓ consistently combines two or more words in short phrases (e.g., “daddy hat”, “truck go down”)
- ✓ enjoys being with other children
- ✓ begins to offer toys to peers and imitates other children’s actions and words
- ✓ people can understand his/her words 50 to 60 percent of the time

- ✓ forms words and sounds easily and effortlessly
- ✓ holds books the right way up and turns pages
- ✓ “reads” to stuffed animals or toys
- ✓ scribbles with crayons

### **By 30 months...**

- ✓ understands the concepts of size (big/little) and quantity (a little, a lot, more)
- ✓ uses some adult grammar (e.g., “two apples”, “bird *fly*ing”, “I jump*ed*”)
- ✓ uses more than 350 words
- ✓ uses action words (e.g., run, spill, fall)
- ✓ begins taking short turns with other children, using both toys and words
- ✓ shows concern when another child is hurt or sad
- ✓ combines several actions in play (e.g., feeds doll then puts her to sleep; puts blocks in the train then drives train and drops blocks off)
- ✓ puts sounds at the start of most words
- ✓ produces words with two or more syllables or beats (e.g., “ba-na-na”, “com-pu-ter”, “apple”)
- ✓ recognizes familiar logos and signs (e.g., stop sign)
- ✓ remembers and understands familiar stories

### **By 3 years...**

- ✓ understands “who”, “what”, “where” and “why” questions
- ✓ creates long sentences, using 5 or more words
- ✓ talks about past events – trip to grandparents’ house, a day at childcare
- ✓ tells simple stories
- ✓ shows affection for favorite playmates
- ✓ engages in multi-step pretend play (e.g., cooking a meal, repairing a car)
- ✓ is understood by most people outside of the family, most of the time
- ✓ is aware of the function of print (e.g., in menus, lists, signs)
- ✓ has a beginning interest in, and awareness of, rhyming

### **By 4 years...**

- ✓ follows directions involving 3 or more steps (e.g., “First get some paper, then draw a picture, last give it to mom”)
- ✓ uses adult-type grammar
- ✓ tells stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end
- ✓ talks to try to solve problems with adults and other children
- ✓ demonstrates increasingly complex imaginative play
- ✓ is understood by strangers almost all of the time
- ✓ is able to generate simple rhymes (e.g., “cat-bat”)
- ✓ matches some letters with their sounds (e.g., “letter T says ‘tuh’)

### **By 5 years...**

- ✓ follows group directions (e.g., “all the boys get a toy”)
- ✓ understands directions involving “if...then” (e.g., “*If* you’re wearing runners, *then* line up for gym”)
- ✓ describes past, present and future events in detail
- ✓ seeks to please his/her friends
- ✓ shows increasing independence in friendships – may visit neighbor by him/herself
- ✓ uses almost all of the sounds of their language with few to no errors
- ✓ knows all the letters of the alphabet
- ✓ identifies the sounds at the beginning of some words (e.g., “Pop starts with the ‘puh’ sound”)

If a child is not able to complete just one milestone for their age, a speech and language assessment should be recommended. In the meantime (and while they wait), it is important to ensure that the child has had exposure to this skill as well as time to practice. Children gain skills through experience. Add the skill repeatedly into their daily routine to provide the time to practice.

## Quick speech and language reference guide

Age	12 months	18 months	2 years	3 years	4 years
<b>Words Used</b>	*3-5 words	*20 words	*100-150 words	500-2000 words	2000 + words
<b>Length of Message</b>	1 word	1-2 words	2-4 words	5-8 words	Tells stories Adult type grammar
<b>Clarity of Speech</b> (what strangers understand)	40%		60%	80%	100%



## Receptive and expressive language skills by age

Age	RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE	EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE		
	Comprehension (Understands)	Spoken Vocabulary (Says)	Grammar	Length of Utterance (Combines)
<b>6mos</b>	Watches your face as you talk Turns to source of sound Startles at loud or sudden sounds			
<b>1yr</b>	1 step directions: “sit down” Looks at something you point to Understands “no” Responds to name	Uses 3 - 5 single words consistently (*20 single words by 18 months)		1 word
<b>2yrs</b>	2 step directions: “go get your book and show it to grandma” Points to many body parts on request	Uses 100 - 150 words	Uses some pronouns “me/mine/you”	2-4 word phrases “truck go down” “daddy go”
<b>3yrs</b>	WHO/WHAT/ WHERE questions Remembers familiar stories	Uses 500 - 2000 words	Uses plural, present progressive “truck going down da hill”	5 - 8-word sentences
<b>4yrs</b>	3 step directions: “get paper, draw a picture and give it to daddy”	Uses 2000 + words	Uses adult type grammar Tells stories with clear beginning/ middle and end	Complete sentences
<b>5yrs</b>	Follows “If....then...” and group directions (e.g., “If you have green socks then raise your hand.”)		Describes past, present and future events in detail	Complete sentences

## Learning More than One Language

Studies show that babies all over the world learn to speak two languages with success. Recent research on brain development shows that speaking in more than one language may benefit children now and into their adult life; especially in the areas of concentration and memory.

Learning a second language can happen at any age (from birth or later). This can also happen in different environments such as in the home, at daycare, at school, and in the community.

Children with strong language skills in their first language will learn a second language more easily and will learn best from people who speak that language WELL and OFTEN.

Strong language skills, especially in their first language, are more likely to help children:

- ✓ Have stronger bonds with their parents
- ✓ Have better communication skills
- ✓ Be better prepared for school

Should a speech or language delay be present, it will appear in the same way for each of the languages the child speaks.

### What is a child's first language?

A child's first language usually refers to the language the child learned from birth (before the age of 3) and heard most often in their environment. However, some children may have more than one first language: this is the case with children learning two languages at the same time, from birth. When a child learns more than one language, one of these languages may become dominant.

A child's dominant language is the language that the child uses more often and in which he has more words, longer sentences, and fewer pauses.

## Why should children learn their first language?

When children have a strong first language base, they learn a second language more easily. They also do better at school with reading and writing.

## How can I help a child learn their first language?

Children learn language best from people who speak the language WELL and OFTEN. They learn to talk by listening and talking to parents, siblings, grandparents, friends and caregivers. Encourage parents to speak their first language with their child. Label many different objects, talk about what you are doing, talk about your feelings, tell stories and express your ideas. Use songs, rhymes, stories and games you have learned from your culture and family. During these language-based activities, children also learn about their culture and identity.

## What can we expect from a child learning a second language?

- ✓ **A silent time of up to 6 to 7 months in the second language:** A child needs time to understand a new language before using it. During this time, the child might listen but not talk. The child's first language should continue to grow.
- ✓ **Mixing the two languages:** Children may use words from both languages in one sentence to help replace words they don't know.
- ✓ **Grammatical errors:** Children will make mistakes in the new language until they figure out all the rules.





## How can I help a child learn more than one language?

A child needs REPEATED AND CONSISTENT exposure to each language. Here are some ways to do this:

<b><i>“One parent-one language”</i></b>	One parent speaks one language to the child; the other parent speaks the other language to the child.
<b><i>“One place-one language”</i></b>	One language is spoken at home; the other at daycare or at school.
<b><i>“One activity-one language”</i></b>	One language is spoken at bath time; the other is spoken at mealtime.

Learning a new language is easier when we can associate the language with a person, a place or an activity.



# The *First Words Communication Checkup* Online Screening Tool

## What is the *First Words Communication Checkup* screening tool?

- ✓ interactive online screening tool available to Ottawa parents/legal guardians and professionals supporting families in accessing services
- ✓ screenings available for children from 6 months to 5 years of age
- ✓ screens for speech, language, social communication, fine and gross motor skills as well as red flags
- ✓ provides instant results based on the answers provided as well as next steps for the parent/legal guardian to take in order to support the child's development
- ✓ triages families in the event of a referral result, to the most suitable agency to support their child's developmental needs and referral criteria for services in Ottawa

## How was the *First Words Communication Checkup* developed?

- ✓ through consultation between Speech-Language Pathologists, Ottawa Children's Treatment Centre (OCTC) staff and the First Words (FW) Health Promotion team
- ✓ developed in partnership with the Ministry of Children and Family Services of Ontario, other preschool speech and language programs in the province as well as our partners at OCTC and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO)
- ✓ by sourcing red flags listed in the Eligibility Guidelines for Developmental and Rehabilitation Services for Children under 4 Years, developed in partnership with CHEO, FW, and OCTC
- ✓ based on English and French developmental milestones: this screening tool may not be 100% reflective of a child's development in other languages or cultures.

**\*The *First Words Communication Checkup* is intended to be used as a screening tool, not a diagnostic test.**

## How does the *First Words Communication Checkup* benefit families living in Ottawa?

- ✓ Access to French and English questionnaires.
- ✓ Available 24hrs a day at [www.firstwords.ca](http://www.firstwords.ca). No appointment needed.
- ✓ Conveniently access the tool on any device such as desktop, laptop, tablet and mobile phone with internet access.
- ✓ Instant results based on answers submitted and clear next steps are provided.
- ✓ *Optional:* Start the referral process online by providing personal information through our secure site and immediately access the First Words intake package. This step will provide the child's screening results to the agency listed in their results in order to inform their future assessment. It also provides instant access to our intake package sent by email.

## What can parents expect when completing the *First Words Communication Checkup*?

- Questions about communication, fine motor, and gross motor skills as well as developmental red flags.
- A detailed results page which includes highlighted missed milestones as well as next steps to support the child. The choice to print, save or receive results by email.
- Recommendations may include:
  - ✓ No follow-up required as the child may be developing typically and a recommendation to come back at the child's next milestone.
  - ✓ Referral to the First Words Program for a speech-language assessment.
  - ✓ Referral to the Ottawa Children's Treatment Centre for a developmental or psychological assessment.
  - ✓ Recommendation to visit the child's primary care provider to look at other areas of development highlighted on their results page.
  - ✓ For children eligible for Senior Kindergarten: a recommendation to speak to their child's school principal regarding their speech and/or language concerns.

## When can you make a referral to First Words?

- ✓ When a child does NOT meet speech and language milestones.
- ✓ When a parent is concerned.

## How can a family refer to First Words?

Families may start their referral to First Words by:

1. Completing *the First Words Communication Checkup* online screening tool at [www.firstwords.ca](http://www.firstwords.ca). This ensures that the family will be referred to the services that best suit their child's developmental needs.  
\*Families who face barriers in completing the *First Words Communication Checkup* (language, literacy, limited computer access, etc.) may call our Intake Office directly to complete a self-referral.
2. Self-referring directly to the First Words Intake Office at 613-737-7600, ext. 2500.
3. The child's primary care provider faxing a referral to the First Words Intake Office.

\*Families may choose to seek out private speech pathology services in the community while waiting for their child's speech-language assessment with First Words. A list of private practitioners can be found on the First Words Website under "[Resources](#)".



# Building the Foundation for a Successful Program

## The gift of extra hands and time

As your extra set of hands, volunteers can assist in setting up the play space, greeting families, wiping tables, sweeping floors and preparing activities. This allows you to give families extra time and attention, and contributes to a well-run program. Depending on their experience, volunteers may be able to observe behaviours and interactions between parents and children and contribute to debriefing sessions with the facilitators after each program.

## Communication with colleagues and volunteers

Good communication within a team is essential. Ensure that facilitators, as well as volunteers, understand the expectations related to their role and are clear on tasks that are delegated to each member.

Tasks that may be delegated:

- ✓ Room set-up
- ✓ Preparation of snack, dishes, water
- ✓ Greeting of families and attendance sheet
- ✓ Taking photos of each family during the various activities at each session
- ✓ Timekeeper (ensure that the group moves on to the next activity on time)
- ✓ Washing tables and preparation of next activity
- ✓ Facilitation of circle time
- ✓ Parent chat – discussing the weekly communication theme
- ✓ Handing out of homework bags
- ✓ Parent Engagement Checklist

## Setting the tone for acceptance and belonging in the group

When children are not meeting their milestones or present with difficult behaviour, parents may feel judged or uncomfortable participating in community programs.

*The Chat Room Program* should be a safe space for all families. Information gathered during the pre-screening of families helps the facilitators plan for expected difficult behaviours during the program as well as make plans for extra support in the form of volunteers to help manage the group. It is important to communicate with families before and during each session that all children are welcome and that staff will support the family to work through difficult behaviours as they arise.

Normalize that all children develop at their own rhythm. Stress the importance of meeting the child at their current milestones and abilities and that activities introduced through the program will help to scaffold the child's learning where possible.

Celebrate all successes, no matter how small.



## Strategies for building partnerships with families

- ✓ Create an environment in which parents/guardians are comfortable enough to speak and interact.
- ✓ Value the parents/guardians comments and insights and make use of their knowledge about their child's strengths and needs.
- ✓ Actively listen to parents/guardians by communicating with words, eye contact, and a posture that promotes open communication.
- ✓ Avoid judgments.
- ✓ Ask questions that will start a conversation about their child and listen to their answers before reacting.
- ✓ Use observation tools or developmental profiles which are shared frequently with the parents/guardians. Take the time to present the documents and ensure that they are understood.
- ✓ Speak with parents/guardians in the playroom or foyer to share general information and/or select a private confidential area to discuss concerns.
- ✓ Be aware of the time of day that is best to talk to parents/guardians (e.g., are they quickly in and out at the end of the day and possibly have more time in the morning?).
- ✓ Encourage parents/guardians to participate in all aspects of the program.
- ✓ Have resource information available to you so that you can share it with the parents/guardians when required (e.g., contact information for First Words).

*Adapted with permission from the Strategies for Building Partnerships with Families,*

*CISS Newsletter, September 3, 2014*

## Supporting parents'/caregivers' engagement while attending the program

Life is busy and it can be difficult for parents to be present in the moment. Support families to be present during the program by encouraging them to get down to the child's level and play. Should parents get distracted with cell phones, stress the importance of being present to foster attachment with their child and to take advantage of all communication opportunities.

To help build the parents' confidence:

- ✓ Build a rapport with the family by using active listening and supporting them through what they may be experiencing each week.
- ✓ Highlight the use of weekly strategies and any positive interactions they have with their child.
- ✓ Provide concrete examples through modeling of how parents can connect with their child through play. Many parents don't know how or feel uncomfortable playing with their child.
- ✓ Help parents connect with other parents by highlighting a commonalities they have with someone else. (e.g., age of child, neighborhood, etc.)
- ✓ Check-in with families repeatedly during the session to ensure they feel comfortable with the content and to see if they have questions.
- ✓ Be present, engaged and dynamic with the families.
- ✓ Check-in with families with a follow-up telephone call when they are unable to attend a session. This fosters a sense of belonging and also allows you to discuss any missed material so they are on track for the next session.





## Managing difficult behaviours

It is important to discuss with families what behaviours are acceptable in the program so that facilitators can try to anticipate any difficulties before they arise. Many factors can affect a child's behaviour:

- ✓ Parental attachment
- ✓ Hunger
- ✓ Sleep
- ✓ Energy level
- ✓ Attention
- ✓ Frustration
- ✓ New siblings or change in routine at home
- ✓ Transitions
- ✓ Weather
- ✓ Difficult interactions with peers or parent
- ✓ Etc.

When possible and as difficult behaviours arise, pull the family aside to support the managing of the behaviour. Ensure that families feel comfortable stepping out of the room or going for a walk if their child has difficulty managing. It may be helpful to have a discussion after the session or call the family at a later time to provide feedback of how to manage the behaviour as a team at future sessions.

Circle time can be a fun activity but is difficult for many children to manage. Be sure to observe the group and adapt your planned activities accordingly.

Despite everyone's best efforts, *The Chat Room Program* may not be the right fit for everyone. If difficult behaviors are not manageable, it is important to support the family in finding alternate programs or community resources to suit their child's needs.



# How to Talk to Parents and Caregivers about Sensitive Issues Related to Developmental Concerns

## Sharing sensitive news

One of the most challenging issues in recognizing a potential concern with a child's development is sharing this concern with parents/caregivers. It is important to be sensitive when suggesting there may be a reason to have a further assessment. You want parents/caregivers to feel capable and to be empowered to make decisions.

The way in which sensitive news is shared has both immediate and long-term effects on the family (and child) in terms of how parents perceive the situation and how ready or willing they are to access support (TeKolste, 2009; First Signs, 2009).

Many parents are not aware or may not recognize that their child is at risk. Sharing sensitive news can be challenging both for the parents as well as the person delivering the news. Upon receiving sensitive news about their child, some parents might react with a variety of emotions including shock, anger, disbelief, and fear. Parents hearing sensitive news might also feel overwhelmed and might need time to process and then accept the information.

For the professional, sharing the sensitive news with families is often challenging and may sometimes play out in a reluctance to initiate the discussion. Among barriers expressed by professionals are fears of the following:

- Causing the parents/caregivers pain and negative emotional reactions
- Parents being unready to discuss concerns
- Parents rejecting this information
- Being culturally inappropriate
- Lack of knowledge of resources
- Lack of time
- Own discomfort at addressing some issues/subjects

There is no one way that always works best but there are some things to keep in mind when addressing concerns. It is hoped that the following framework will be useful in preparing professionals for sharing concerns in a clear, informative, sensitive and supportive manner, acknowledging the parents'/caregivers' perspectives and feelings.

Presenting information in a professional manner lends credibility to your concerns (TeKolste, 2009; First Signs, 2009) and could be helpful to the parent. Make sure parents feel that they are not alone.

## Plan to set the stage for a successful conversation

- ✓ It is extremely helpful if you have previously set the expectation that your professional role includes monitoring the development of all children in your care and ensuring they get support if necessary to optimize their potential.
- ✓ Set up the meeting in a private space when possible.
- ✓ Allow for as much time as might be necessary without interruption.
- ✓ Developing a warm, trusting relationship with the parent/caregiver is helpful in easing the process of sharing concerns. It is most supportive if the staff member with the best relationship with the family is selected to share the information.
- ✓ Make sure you properly document your meeting and your concerns.
- ✓ Ensure there is a plan for follow-up action with respect to referrals and follow-up meetings (First Signs, 2009).
- ✓ Begin with the child's strengths and positive attributes.
- ✓ Start by explaining that it is helpful to get as much information as possible regarding a child's skills and areas to work on, and that early intervention is important.

## Empathize: put yourself in the parents' and caregivers' shoes

Empathy allows for the development of a trusting, collaborative relationship. It is important to acknowledge that the parents and caregivers are the experts in knowing their child, even though you have knowledge of child development. Ensure you listen carefully. Acknowledge and reflect their responses. When parents and caregivers have a chance to share feelings without feeling judged they might be more receptive to hearing sensitive information.

It is useful to begin the discussion with sensitive probing questions to find out what the parents already know and what their concerns are. Try to use open-ended questions (e.g., "Do you have any concerns?", "How do you feel about your child's progress?").

It is also important to find out how much detail the family wants to know. If you give too much information when the parent is not ready, they may feel overwhelmed or inadequate. (First Signs, 2009)

## Sharing the information

Be sensitive to a parent's/caregiver's readiness for information. You may want to offer information you have by asking parents what they would like to know first or what they feel they need to know first, as they may not be sure where to start. Note that some cultural and language barriers may prevent the parents from openly or directly asking their questions.

When you are more of a resource than an authority, parents may feel less threatened. Give parents ample opportunity to ask questions.

Having a parent use tools such as the [\*First Words Communication Checkup\*](#) or the [\*Nipissing District Developmental Screen\*](#) may help open the way for discussion. It may help to specify that the screening tools are used by many parents to help them understand their child's development and to learn about new activities that encourage growth and development.

- ✓ Link what you are telling them with what they already know.
- ✓ Avoid the use of professional jargon.
- ✓ Make use of the written documentation you have gathered on their child's strengths and needs on age-based screening tools.
- ✓ Present the information in a neutral matter. State facts, advantages, and disadvantages without presenting your personal beliefs, convictions or undermining other approaches of practices.
- ✓ Encourage parents to explore all possibilities and their options. Do not speak on behalf of an approach or an agency.
- ✓ Approach the opportunity for accessing extra help in a positive manner. (e.g., "You can get extra help for your child so he will be as ready as he can be for school.")
- ✓ Try to balance the concerns you raise with genuine positive comments about the child (e. g., "Johnny is a real delight. He is so helpful when things need tidying up. I have noticed that he seems to have some trouble...").

Remember throughout the conversation that it is important to empathize with the parents/caregivers even if they are distressed, confrontational and angry or disagree with you. (TeKolste, 2009; First Signs, 2009)

## Planning the next steps

Have the family participate fully in the final decision about what to do next. Your role is to provide information, support, and guidance. The final decision is theirs. It is important to summarize the discussion, the agreed upon next steps as well as any questions for follow up.

Finally, if the parents suggest a “wait and see” approach, explore why they feel this way. Allow them to express and explore their previous experiences. Acknowledge if concerns are related to the professionals’ agenda vs. the parents’ agenda. It may be important to offer reasons why it is not appropriate to “wait and see”. Explain that early intervention can dramatically improve a child’s development and prevent additional concerns such as behaviour issues and that the “wait and see” approach may delay addressing medical or developmental concerns.

Early intervention helps parents/caregivers understand child behaviour and health issues, and will increase confidence that everything possible is being done to ensure that the child reaches their full potential. However, it is important that the parent is fully informed. If the parent is not ready and needs more information, encourage further exploration of every approach, option or possibility available to them.

If the parents refuse to provide care for their child and/or refuse to give consent for intervention and you feel that the child may be in need of protection, your child protection concerns must be reported to the CAS, The Children’s Aid Society.

Be genuine and caring. You are raising concerns because you want their child to do the best that they can, not because you want to point out “weaknesses” or “faults”. Your body language is important; parents may already be fearful of the information. (TeKolste, 2009; First Signs, 2009) retrieved from <http://medicalhome.org/physicians/sharing-sensitive-news/>

It is important to acknowledge their fears as well as your own concerns and limitations. Don’t entertain too many “What if?” questions. A helpful response could be: “Those are good questions. The professionals who will assess your child will be able to answer them. This is a first step to indicate if further assessment is needed”.

*Adapted from Red Flags: A Quick Reference Guide for Early Years  
Professionals in Ottawa, 2016*

# Facilitating *The Chat Room Program*

## Before the Program Starts

### Recruiting and pre-screening families

The intended target audience for *The Chat Room Program*:

- Children 18 to 30 months of age. The age can be flexible depending on the needs of the children but it is helpful to ensure the children have similar developmental needs to ensure they can engage in the planned activities.
- Children who are not meeting their current speech and language milestones.
- Children who are currently waiting for an assessment or speech therapy from First Words or a private practitioner.
- Parents who require support in engaging their child's communication, play or fostering attachment with their child.
- Vulnerable families.

While recruiting families to participate in your program, pre-screening is an important step to ensure that families are a good fit for your program. Discuss the outline of the program and parental concerns regarding the child's current milestones and behaviours in a group setting. This also allows for discussion regarding the parent's goals and expectations for their child in *The Chat Room Program*. With all this information in hand, you will be better able to anticipate difficult behaviours and plan your activities to help scaffold the child's learning.

Be sure to discuss the importance of timely and weekly attendance to the program, homework activities as well as childcare arrangements for younger/older siblings.

Deciding how many families to accommodate in your program depends on the:

- ✓ number of staff who will be facilitating
- ✓ number of volunteers supporting the program
- ✓ physical space
- ✓ needs of the children and their families

Ensure to take into account that the families will need a great deal of support, guidance, and modeling of the strategies during each session. *The Chat Room Program* pilot sessions ran with 8 children and their parents/guardians. The intimate group allowed for much interaction with the families and provided a more manageable space for children to build their confidence and social skills in order to participate in larger community groups following the program.

## Choosing a location

When choosing the location for the program, it is important to think about accessibility.

- ✓ Close to public transit
- ✓ Ease of access to the building/ play space (e.g., locked entrances, wheelchair or stroller friendly)
- ✓ Size of the playroom in relation to the number of families registered
- ✓ Space that allows for a variety of activities
- ✓ Equipment suitable for young children (e.g., tables, chairs, age appropriate toys)
- ✓ Lighting (e.g., ability to turn some lights off if needed)
- ✓ Acoustics in the play space (e.g., a lack of soft materials may result in a noisy playroom which could be difficult for children with sensory processing difficulties)

## Choosing when to run the program

Consider the following to help you choose the best time to run your program:

- ✓ Time of year /season (e.g., difficulty in recruiting families during summer months, transportation issues during winter months)
- ✓ Cultural practices and religious holidays (e.g., fasting may result in lower attendance, consideration for prayer times, etc)
- ✓ Statutory and Civic holidays
- ✓ Participating families' schedules
- ✓ Personal holidays / volunteer holidays
- ✓ Planning time to recruit families, volunteers and preparation of materials for the program
- ✓ Set-up / clean-up time required for your program
- ✓ Public transit schedules to allow families to arrive on-time
- ✓ Personal travel time
- ✓ Child's developmental needs (e.g., naptime, mealtimes, etc.)
- ✓ Location shutdowns
- ✓ Availability of cover-off staff, if available (e.g., illness)

## During the Program

### Attending to paperwork

Your program or agency may have specific requirements for documents and waivers that will need to be completed by the participants attending your program. Gather all needed documents ahead of time so that participants can complete them before the program starts.

#### **Examples of documents and information to collect and prepare:**

- Agency / program registration form
- Photo consent form
- Emergency contact information for the parent attending
- Food related allergies or preferences for the child / adult
- Attendance form which includes special notes regarding the child's needs, behaviour, allergies and food preferences, etc.
- Pre/post evaluation forms (included in Appendix I)
- Parental Engagement evaluation tool (included in Appendix III)
- Other documents as needed

Ideally, have families complete all paperwork at the Parent Education workshop if appropriate.

### Pre and post evaluation

The use of pre and post evaluation tools allows facilitators to measure if the program met its expected outcomes in increasing the knowledge of all participants in the areas of communication development, attachment and knowledge of community resources. It also allows for measurement of perceived barriers reported by the parents/caregivers related to participating in mainstream community programs and re-evaluates their impressions after their attendance in *The Chat Room Program*.

Pre and post evaluation templates for *The Chat Room Program* can be found in Appendix I.





## Parental Engagement evaluation tool

The Parental Engagement evaluation tool has been included in the program to help measure the parent's level of engagement with their child, with the facilitators as well as with other families in the program. This evaluation is completed at the end of each session and promotes discussion between the facilitators to ensure the parent can be supported with concrete strategies during the next session to encourage better outcomes at the end of the program.

During these discussions, facilitators (and volunteers, if appropriate) begin to discuss the children's as well as their parent's daily successes and progress. It is important to note these successes so that you can share them with the family at the next session. Each member of your team will have different experiences with the family at each session. Coming together at the end of each session can be beneficial to discuss areas of progress/concern for each family and to make a plan to support the family the following week. Support may be in the form of additional examples, providing the family with community resources, etc.

## Use of photography during the sessions

Taking photos of the families participating in various activities in your program can promote a sense of belonging within the group. Designate a member of your team to take pictures of the children and their parent while engaged in various activities during each session. Try and capture photos of families "in the moment" during an interaction and while they are practicing communication strategies rather than "posed" shots.

Some adults may feel uncomfortable having their picture taken. Ensure that families clearly understand why pictures are being taken and what will be done with them in the future. It is important to respect a parent's wish if they or their child is not to be photographed.

Ensure that families have signed an acknowledgment/waiver that photos will be taken during the program and understand the nature of their use.

**\*\*Each family is presented with a photo book during the last session of the program. This photo book helps children (and parents) in recalling and talking about what they did during the program.**

## Setting Up the Environment

The learning environment is the mix of spaces and contexts in which a young child grows and learns. The environment is often referred to as the “third teacher” (after parents and educators) due to its importance in early learning.

Environments should be welcoming and interesting. Unfamiliar surroundings and people can provoke a stress response, which has the potential to affect a child’s learning abilities. Avoid making too many changes in the play space in the first few weeks of your program. Once children become more familiar with the space and routine, begin to add a variety of new and interesting areas and features – some level of uncertainty and novelty generates intellectual arousal, interest and opportunities to communicate.

Different parts of an environment can have different stimulation levels, which have a direct effect on how children play. Large areas encourage movement and use of space and closed areas with more soft features lend themselves to reading or discovery activities. With this in mind, it’s clear that a diverse environment creates a variety of experiences and opportunities for a young learner.

The set up of the environment is a very individualized part of this program and will need to be adjusted session by session, depending on the needs of the group. Ensure to plan for prep-time with your co-facilitator to discuss the group dynamics and individual needs.



## “Less-is-More”

Ensure that the room has a diverse range of toys but be selective with the number of toys you make available; the goal of the program is to promote social interaction. Minimizing the number of toys in the playroom will require children to play in closer proximity to one another and will encourage communication. Parents will also be in closer proximity to other parents which promotes social interactions and connections to be formed.

Limiting the toys and visual stimulation allows the parent and child to focus their play and build on language and skills with repetition.

Keep a number of old bed sheets available to cover off any unused shelves or equipment, or simply turn a toy shelf towards the wall to indicate the area is closed. This is a good visual for children and their parent/guardian that this area is “off-limits”. Closing off areas of the room will also help to minimize distractions for young children who are learning how to participate in circle time for longer periods of time.

As the weeks progress, more choice and variety can be introduced into the playroom. By adding more toys, activities and play areas each week, the sessions will begin to resemble a typical community playgroup schedule. On the last week of the program, families should have access to all learning centres in the room for the duration of the group.



## Communication temptations

Communication temptations are setting up the environment to *tempt* children to *communicate* with us. A child is much more likely to communicate if they have a reason for doing so!

It is important to observe the child's communication abilities to determine what goal you will be working towards. If a child is using only sounds to communicate, do not expect the child to respond with words. The increase in communication from the child may come in the form of using their sounds AND gestures.

The steps to this type of communication temptation are as follows:

1. Find an activity or an object that the child really enjoys. Look for an activity that is easily stopped and started (e.g., bubbles or a song or book).
2. Arrange the environment so that you create an obstacle to getting that object, but ensure that the child can see the object. (e.g., Set out a train table but place all the train cars in a clear container that the child is unable to open.)
3. Start the activity, have a bit of fun and then *stop*. Put the lid on the bubbles or don't turn the page in the book until the child makes the request. (e.g., sounds, gestures, reaches, words, etc.)
4. **WAIT!** Adults often jump in too soon as they know what the child needs. Allow the child to initiate and communicate first. Look expectantly at the child, like you are waiting for them to do something (which, of course, you are!)
5. When the child communicates with you verbally, praise them and repeat the word as you help or continue the activity.
6. When the child communicates nonverbally, interpret what they are communicating and name the word (as the child would if they could) as you help or continue the activity.

Communication temptations are very effective in increasing communication in children, however, we want to make sure that we are not causing the child unnecessary frustration. It is important to wait for the child to initiate the communication but, jump in and help just before the child loses interest in the activity or becomes frustrated.

Communication temptations also give children the opportunity to be the initiator of communication, rather than a responder to questions or to requests to talk.

**Examples of communication temptations:**

- Set up a game, leaving out an important part (e.g., dice), and say “let’s play”
- Set up a painting activity and ‘forget’ to give the child a paintbrush
- Sing a favorite song and leave out a word or stop just before an action
- When reading a book don’t turn the page until the child initiates communication to indicate “turn page”
- Place toys and preferred objects out of reach of the child but in their view
- Activate a wind-up toy, let it deactivate, and hand it to the child
- Open a jar of bubbles but don’t blow any bubbles
- Give the child a cup but ‘forget’ to add water, milk or juice

*More ideas for Communication Temptations can be found in Appendix III of this manual.*



## Establishing a routine

Children love routine! Routine helps families know what to expect in your program, helps keep facilitators on track and helps everyone feel more at ease during the program.

It is important to keep in mind that flexibility is also important. Should you notice that children are having difficulty transitioning from one activity to another, the schedule may not be allowing for enough play time. You may need to alter the routine to account for the children's temperaments or behaviours. Add a fun song or a countdown to mark the nearing of a transition time. This helps prepare children to move to the next activity.

If some children in the group are having difficulty moving to the next activity, they may require a warning a few minutes ahead of the transition so they are able to finish their activity or play before moving on.

“10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1! Hands on your head. “  
(Follow with a tidy-up song.)

Example of a typical schedule for *The Chat Room Program*:

9:15 9:30	Welcome – Free Play
9:30 9:40	Circle Time
9:40 9:50	Parent Chat: introduction of daily strategy / Free Play
9:50 10:05	Free Play – Strategies / Practice Time
10:05 10:30	Washroom / Handwashing /Snack
10:30 10:45	Craft Time / Sensory Play
10:45 11:05	Gross Motor / Active Play
11:05 11:30	Circle Time / Good-bye

During *The Chat Room Program*, children are encouraged to participate in the planned activity. If they are unable or not willing to participate, the children are given alternative choices (e.g., children participate in a planned craft time but can move to sensory play if they are not interested in the organized craft activity). Each group is different. Get to know the families and their abilities, and create a routine that works for THEM.



## Transition times

Transition times can be triggers for many children; causing anxiety, and negative behaviours. Ensure that your routine stays consistent so children as well as adults can anticipate what comes next. Use visual cues (e.g., actions, turn off lights) as well as a song to indicate to the group that it's time to change activities. If children are having difficulty, you will need to investigate if the children need more lead time (e.g., "5 more minutes") or if the schedule is not providing sufficient time to play and explore, thus not meeting the needs of the participants.

Ask parents if they have a strategy that works at home to help their child move between activities with more ease.

## Parent chats

Parent chats are a weekly opportunity to:

- Connect and build a rapport with the parents in the program.
- Introduce the weekly strategy and provide various examples of how to include it during daily routines as well as in the program.
- Get feedback on how their child is adapting in the program and changes at home.
- Celebrate progress and successes, no matter how small.
- Answer questions from parents regarding their child's development.
- Share community resources.
- Build the child's confidence by playing independently in the playroom, away from their parent.

It is important to ensure that the Parent Chat sessions are inclusive and a safe place for all participants to share their experiences and ask questions. Ensure that families know that they are encouraged to share within the group but that passive participation in the chat is also acceptable. As the participants build a rapport with the facilitators as well as with other parents, they will begin to share their experiences and begin to ask questions.

Should you notice that a participant has not spoken during the chat, it is important to ask them if they have anything to add or any questions (e.g., "(Name), do you have anything to share?"). You may also want to ask a more direct question such as: "How does (child's name) request something at home". Watch the participant's body language to read their comfort level and respectfully move on should they not feel comfortable sharing. Connect with them on an individual basis during another activity to receive feedback.

Reiterate that the children are all at different stages of their communication learning and that it is important to meet the child at their current communication level.

## Circle time

Circle time can be a fun activity but can also be difficult for some children to manage. It is important to have realistic expectations when facilitating circle time. Younger children or children with limited exposure to circle time may have difficulty sitting and participating.

- ✓ Start with a short circle time of 5 to 10 minutes to determine how the group will tolerate the activity.
- ✓ Have a plan but **don't stick to it!** You may need to adapt your plan if the children are too excited or having difficulty participating.
- ✓ Be interactive and silly – this will help engage both children and adults.
- ✓ Have a variety of activities on-hand such as traditional songs, finger plays, active songs, props, and books.
- ✓ Encourage participation through the use of props, allowing children to choose an animal in a song or choose the next song to sing.
- ✓ Address sideline conversations by parents in a timely manner. These distractions can make it hard for you to facilitate but also for children to listen. This can be done in a playful way by asking a parent by name to choose an action or animal or by asking the group (children and parents) to sing the next song in a whispering voice.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to close a story book or stop a song before it is finished and end circle time early if the group is not engaged. Parents will also breathe a sigh of relief as they will no longer need to try and curb their child's behaviour.
- ✓ Have quiet activities and books available nearby for children who are not able to sit in circle time for a long period of time. Encourage parents to step away from circle time with their child if needed but to encourage them periodically to come back and join the group; even if only for a few moments.



\*See Appendix I for additional resources on facilitating circle time.



## Snack time

During *The Chat Room Program*, snacks are provided to the families. This ensures that all participants can participate in this important activity. In order to be inclusive to all, be sure to ask families during pre-screening if they have allergies or food preferences.

Snack time is an excellent opportunity to promote communication. Food is a great motivator and allows parents and educators to guide the conversation. To ensure that you can maximize communication opportunities during this activity:

1. Start by asking the child to choose between 2 different colors of plates and between 2 colors of cups (e.g., “Do you want a **blue** plate or a **yellow** plate?”). If the child points to their choice, **name it** as you give them their option.
2. Have an assortment of snack options available but do not leave the options on the table for the children to help themselves.
3. Instruct parents to hold two snack options in their hands and ask the child to make their choice (e.g., “Do you want **apples** or **fish crackers**?”). If the child says “ah” for crackers, offer them one or two crackers only. Count them as you place them on their plate (e.g., “one **cracker**, two **crackers**”). The key is to repeat the word in a natural way as many times as possible during this activity (e.g., “These **crackers** are yummy!”).
4. Once the child has finished the few pieces on their plate, wait for them to ask or gesture that they want more. Remember to name their gesture (e.g. “**More apples.**”).

Providing children with constant choices provides them opportunities to communicate using sounds, gestures or words. Once the child becomes aware that communicating their wants is helping to secure their snack, they should become more eager to communicate their needs.

Should the child become unresponsive or frustrated while offering these choices, place an assortment of snacks on their plate and try again later.

Ensure that the adult is face-to-face with the child.  
That way the child can see the adult’s mouth and how to make the sounds necessary to form words.

## Program Outline

9:15-9:30am	Welcome – Free Play
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As families arrive to your program, ensure that each one is greeted by name and asked to remove outdoor clothing and shoes, sign the attendance form and to settle into the playroom. Using nametags for both adults and children helps the group get to know one another more quickly.

Parents are encouraged to allow their child to choose the activities they wish to do and join them in their play. During this time, facilitators can check in with the families and start to build a rapport. Children as well as their parent may feel anxious and uneasy during the first few sessions. It is important to ensure that they feel welcome in your program.

Things to try:

- ✓ Smile and use the parent and child's first name when talking with them
- ✓ Comment on the child's clothing (e.g., "I notice you are wearing Spiderman shoes!")
- ✓ Play alongside the child without interacting with the child directly (e.g., sit at the opposite side of the sand table and begin playing; mimicking what the child is doing)
- ✓ Introduce parents and children to others
- ✓ Be silly – this will help the group feel comfortable and 'break-the-ice'
- ✓ Point out positive interactions and progress as much as possible

Although small, these strategies will help families start to build a rapport and trust with you and other staff, and begin to feel comfortable in the program.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.

9:30-9:40am	Circle Time
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1. Start by introducing your transition activity to get the group's attention. Take a few moments alongside the group to tidy the playroom.

*"10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1! Hands on your head. "  
(Follow with a tidy-up song.)*

2. Invite the families to join you on the carpet for circle time. Singing during these transition times can help children focus and follow through with moving from one activity to another.



Circle time, circle time.  
Everyone, it's circle time.

3. Once the group is sitting and ready, start by singing a 'hello' or 'welcome' song. Choosing a song that incorporates the children's and the adults' names will help to keep the group engaged. Make this song part of your weekly routine and repeat it at the beginning of each session.

As you sing your song, collect the child with your eye gaze and stop for a brief moment (approx. 3-5 seconds); allowing the child the chance to say their name aloud. Should the child not wish to participate in saying their name, you or the parent can say it for the child until they are ready to do it on their own.

For some children, this may be their first experience participating in circle time. For this reason, ensure that this first experience is positive and also brief. Sing 2-3 songs that incorporate actions and sounds so that the children can participate.

**Examples:**

- ✓ Old MacDonald Had a Farm
- ✓ Roly Poly
- ✓ Twinkle, twinkle little star
- ✓ Eensy, weensy spider
- ✓ If You're Happy and You Know It



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.



9:40-9:50am	Parent Chat: introduction of daily strategy Children: free play
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1. Ask parents to remain seated on the carpet and encourage children to move into the playroom for free play alongside the co-facilitator and volunteers. Children are welcome to stay with their parent during the brief “Parent Chat” should they choose to do so.
2. Introduce the week’s strategy and provide examples of how to use it within the program and during daily routines. Answer questions as they arise.
3. Ask parents to join their child in the playroom to practice the strategy in their interactions with their child.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.

9:50-10:05am	Free Play - Strategies
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1. Move throughout the playroom to touch base with each family, providing feedback and modeling the strategy when interacting with them.

It is important to understand that all participants have different comfort levels when receiving feedback regarding their interactions/play with their child. When providing feedback, always begin with stating one thing that the parent is doing well followed by a recommendation.

Example: *“I like that you are sitting with your child while playing. Try sitting across from your child so that they can see how you are moving your mouth to make the sounds in your words. Let me know if you see a difference in how your child is playing and communicating with you.”*

2. As you near the end of the free play time, ask a volunteer or colleague to wash the snack tables and ensure that dishes and snacks are ready for the next activity.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.

10:05 10:30am	Washroom / Snack
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1. Use visual cues (actions, turn off lights) as well as a song to indicate to the group that it's time to change activities.
2. Encourage parents to assist their child to use the washroom and wash their hands in preparation for snack time. Remind parents that the washroom routine is great activity to build language.
3. Ask children to sit at the table and explain to parents how to present snack options to their child. (See page 56 for specific details surrounding the snack activity.)
4. Ensure that there are quiet activities nearby to occupy children who finish their snack quickly and before the others.
5. Cue a volunteer or colleague to clear or wash tables in preparation for the next activity.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.

10:30 10:45am	Craft Time / Sensory Play
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1. Have all families sit at the table to take part in the structured craft time.
2. Ensure that you are selective with the material available on the table. To encourage communication, create communication temptations (see page 51) with the material you provide to the families (e.g., provide children with their own glue stick but have 2 children share a glue pot). \*Ensure to have extra pots available should the children have difficulty waiting/sharing.
3. Encourage families to continue to practice offering 2 choices to their child throughout this activity (e.g., “Do you want to glue a **horse** or **pig** on the farm?” or “Would you like the **glue** or the **scissors**?”).

4. When the child loses interest in the craft activity, they can move to the sensory bins until the group is ready to move to the next activity. During sensory play, provide a few key words that families can use with their child to describe the activity. (e.g., wet, messy, touch, etc.). Always ensure that children have a second activity in which they can participate. This will reduce the risk of negative behaviours surfacing due to boredom.
5. Towards the end of the activity, cue a volunteer or co-facilitator to prepare the gross-motor area for the next activity.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.

10:45 11:05am	Gross Motor / Active Play
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As you near the end of your program, children are becoming tired and may have difficulty engaging in the activity. Let them move! Gross motor activities allow the child to explore, take chances and learn from others in the room, all the while developing communication.

Remember to set up a few communication temptations in your gross motor play (e.g., have an adult sit on the slide while a child is waiting to slide down, play 'catch' with a child but hold onto the ball for a few more awkward seconds to encourage communication, etc.).

Should some children have difficulty engaging in this activity, try inviting them to play, model the activity (e.g., throwing a ball towards the basketball net), or signing an active song to get the group going (e.g., 'Sleeping Bunnies', 'If You're Happy and You Know It', etc.).

Avoid using this time for structured games or activities and allow the children to move freely in the room. This will ensure they use up extra energy and will promote a more engaged circle time (next activity).

Towards the end of the activity, start putting some of the activities away, leaving less and less material for the children to play with; signaling the end of the gross motor play.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they are engaging in activities.

To assist children in feeling comfortable to participate in circle time, choose songs that are repetitive and that incorporate gestures. Children will participate with gestures long before they sing along to the words.

- ✓ **Have a plan but don't stick to it!** Plan activities and songs that you think may engage the group interest. Always plan more than you need and have a few extra activities or songs prepared. Active songs, props and musical instruments can be handy but ensure that you cover or hide any materials out of sight until you are ready to use them.
- ✓ **Repetition is important.** Repeat short songs or finger plays 2-3 times to allow children to learn and to participate.
- ✓ **Be silly!** The more fun you are having, the more the families will participate in circle time.
- ✓ **Be creative!** If your group enjoys singing 'Sleeping Bunnies', use different animals and talk about what they do (e.g., 'Sleeping Bears' – roar, 'Sleeping Frogs' – jump/ribbit, 'Sleeping Bees' – buzz while wiggling their bottoms, etc.).
- ✓ **Incorporate bubbles!** Bubbles can engage even the most passive child. Ensure that you ask the children to stay seated as you blow the bubbles or ensure there is enough room to move around to avoid any accidents.
- ✓ **Read a book!** Choose a simple book that is repetitive and that has simple pictures (e.g., 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear'). Ensure to sing an active song prior to your book to curb excess energy. Follow up your book with a finger play involving actions.
- ✓ **Read the interest of the group!** Keep an eye on the interest of the group. If the children are having difficulty sitting down or participating, it may be time to end circle time. Do not see this as a failure! It takes time for children to learn to participate in this activity. For some of the children, this may be their first experience with circle time.

### One Little, Two Little Bubbles

(tune: 10 Little Indians)

1 little, 2 little, 3 little bubbles.

4 little, 5 little, 6 little bubbles.

7 little, 8 little, 9 little bubbles.

10 little bubbles go POP! POP! POP!

(Clap your hands as you say POP)

POP, POP, POP the bubbles (x3)

10 little bubbles go POP! POP! POP!

Choose a goodbye song that signals the end of circle time and use it each week.

At the end of this circle time, provide the families with their backpack filled with homework materials and handouts and explain the activities. Encourage families to continue to practice the day's strategies in every activity throughout the week and that you look forward to hearing all about it next week.



Remember to take pictures of the families as they engage in activities.





## Choosing a weekly theme

*The Chat Room Program* supports play-based learning by offering a variety of toys and sensory materials related to the weekly theme. The use of a weekly theme:

- ✓ Provides opportunities for focused stimulation: high concentration of target words are presented to the child in many ways, in a very short period of time (e.g., single words, short phrases, and short sentences).
- ✓ Allows the scaffolding of communication skills to achieve goals.
- ✓ Helps to build and broaden the child's repertoire of play skills while building vocabulary.
  - (e.g., when a child only engages in play at the train table, facilitators will incorporate the train within the weekly theme (farm) to allow for the building of vocabulary while loading farm animals onto the train)
- ✓ Provides families with some structure to enable them to practice weekly communication strategies.
- ✓ Limits the overstimulation of the child by minimizing the number of toys available in the play space – promotes the child to focus for a longer period of time.
- ✓ Provides parents with a starting point and the confidence to play with and engage their child's play.

Examples of themes used in the program: farm, vehicles, Halloween, etc.



# Weekly Session Breakdown

## Communication themes:

Parent workshop: Speech and language development/*The Chat Room Program*

Week 1: Allowing your child to take the lead

Week 2: Allowing your child to lead - Continued

Week 3: Imitate and interpret to build communication

Week 4: Tempting your child to communicate

Week 5: Building communication through turn-taking

Week 6: Celebrating success and review of all weekly strategies



## Required Materials – Parent Workshop

- ❑ Facilitator guide
  - ❑ Flip chart paper
  - ❑ Flip chart markers
  - ❑ Pens
  - ❑ Name tags
  - ❑ Attendance sheet
  - ❑ Forms
    - Agency registration form (if required)
    - Photo consent forms
    - Pre-post evaluation forms
    - List of food allergies/preferences to confirm with families
  - ❑ Masking tape
  - ❑ Pens
  - ❑ Workshop handouts: Visit our website at [www.firstwords.ca](http://www.firstwords.ca) (resources) to download or print the resources below.
    - ❑ [Speech Sound Development Resource Sheet](#)
    - ❑ [Learning More Than One Language](#)
    - ❑ [Help Your Child Develop Early Language](#)
    - ❑ [Help Your Preschooler Develop Language](#)
    - ❑ [Mealtime Tips to Help Stimulate Language Development](#)
    - ❑ First Words' milestone brochures:
      - Your baby's speech and language skills from birth to 30 months
      - Your preschool child's speech and language development (3-5yrs)
- \*You may request English or French copies of these brochures from First Words program at least 2—3 weeks before your workshop.  
Multilingual brochures are available to print on our website <http://firstwords.ca> (resources).
- ❑ Agency or program workshop evaluation form
  - ❑ Projector and screen
  - ❑ First Words' PowerPoint presentation
  - ❑ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
  - ❑ Snack and water for the adults
  - ❑ Snack and water for the children
  - ❑ Other materials you deem fit



## Required Materials – Weekly Sessions

- ❑ Facilitator's manual
- ❑ Forms
  - ❑ Attendance sheet
  - ❑ Food allergies/preferences
  - ❑ Emergency contact list for participants
  - ❑ Parent Engagement Evaluation Tool
- ❑ Masking tape
- ❑ Pens
- ❑ Poster of weekly routine – with times
- ❑ Digital camera
- ❑ Weekly snack
- ❑ Plates / bowls / cups / cutlery / napkins
- ❑ Dishcloths / towels / cleaning supplies
- ❑ Old sheets / covers for toy shelves
- ❑ Backpack for each child
- ❑ Weekly strategy handout/homework sheet
  - ❑ Week 1: Allowing your child to take the lead
  - ❑ Week 2: Allowing your child to take the lead – continued
  - ❑ Week 3: Imitate and interpret to build communication
  - ❑ Week 4: Tempting your child to communicate
  - ❑ Week 5: Building communication through turn-taking
  - ❑ Week 6: Celebrating success and review of all weekly strategies
- ❑ Weekly giveaway for homework
  - ❑ Week 1: play dough
  - ❑ Week 2: ball
  - ❑ Week 3: scarf
  - ❑ Week 4: wind-up toy
  - ❑ Week 5: bubbles
  - ❑ Week 6: homemade sensory book or felt story
- ❑ Variety of toys and activities in various learning centres for the playroom



## Parent Workshop – Overview of *The Chat Room Program*

Families attend a 90 minute workshop to meet the facilitators, visit the program space, receive an overview of *The Chat Room Program*, discuss program goals and complete all necessary documents for registration.

During the workshop, the children will be playing in the playroom nearby, supervised by child minders and/or volunteers.

Forms to be completed:

- ☐ Pre-post evaluation
- ☐ Agency registration forms
- ☐ Photo consent form

*The Chat Room Program* parent workshop should include the following:

- ✓ What is *The Chat Room Program*?
- ✓ Overview of weekly session and schedule
- ✓ Speech and language milestones
- ✓ How to access speech and language services in Ottawa
- ✓ Program expectations (weekly attendance, homework, management of behaviours)
- ✓ Brief overview of communication strategies to be covered during the program
- ✓ Agency policy regarding Privacy and Confidentiality
- ✓ Agency policy regarding Clients Rights and agency values

A PowerPoint presentation of ***The Chat Room Program – Parent Workshop*** is available to you to support the facilitation of your workshop. Should you require support with the presentation, please contact the Health Promotion team at First Words Preschool Speech and Language Program of Ottawa at 613-688-3979.

Our Health Promotion team may be able to support co-facilitation of your workshop based on availability.

## Limits of a workshop session

Given that you will be giving this workshop to parents that are attending with their child, you need to **be prepared for many interruptions**. Children can be unpredictable and may become uncooperative or resist in participating in group or individual activities. You can take the opportunity to point out to parents what their child is communicating with them and support them when possible in providing alternative options to meet the needs of their child. You can't stop the workshop each time a child does not want to participate but reassure the parent that information will be shared with them and is included in the handouts that you are distributing.

Realistically, these interruptions may well make it difficult for you to get through the whole workshop agenda in the time that is allotted. You may have to **shorten an activity** or **leave it out** altogether. If you find you will need to skip some activities in order to finish, choose to **keep the activities that best respond to the needs and interests of your group**.



**KEEP  
CALM  
AND  
CARRY  
ON**

## Key messages and information to pass on

At the end of your workshop, you want parents to leave with the following key messages.

- ✓ Communication development in the first 5 years of a child's life is the best indicator of later success in school and in life.
- ✓ Children must hear language and use it to be able to talk.
- ✓ I can help my child learn to talk by offering many chances for them to communicate every day.
- ✓ Speaking my first language (mother- tongue) is best for my child's language and brain development.

To support these messages, you should aim to bring out other points, which explain the reasons behind the workshop's subject matter and activities.

- ✓ Learning to talk takes time and practice with others!
- ✓ Children communicate from the day they are born.
- ✓ If children are not communicating, it is because it is hard for them.

## Week 1: Allowing your child to take the lead



- ☐ Snacks and water
- ☐ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
- ☐ Craft supplies
- ☐ Circle time book and props
- ☐ Attendance sheet
- ☐ Name tags
- ☐ Weekly give-away: play dough
- ☐ Weekly strategy/homework sheet
- ☐ Selected resource sheets from Appendices I to III

Although “following the lead of the child” focuses on child-initiated learning, this approach does not rely on chance. Adults must still “set the stage” with stimulating environments enriched with materials that are both developmentally and individually appropriate. Adults need to serve as guides, facilitators, and scaffolds.

When a child is allowed to lead in play, it shows that you are interested in them and what they have to tell you. They feel listened to and it helps them to feel more confident. You learn more about the child’s interests and together, you have more fun. A child who leads, lets us know what they need and want from us to help them learn.

How to follow a child’s lead...

- ✓ **Watch** to see what the child is interested in and allow them to choose the toy or activity. Pay attention to how and why they communicate. Do they respond to a noise the toy makes? Do they startle, smile or giggle?
- ✓ **Imitate and Model:** Imitating the sounds or words the child says, shows that you are interested in what they are saying and prompts them to imitate what you say or do. When imitating what the child has said, keep eye contact and repeat the word or phrase slowly, exaggerating the sound they had difficulty with. This method is called modeling. Do not ask the child to repeat the word again. By slowing down and exaggerating the sound in the word, you are naturally prompting the child to repeat the word.
- ✓ **Expand:** Expanding is adding more words to what the child said and is a good way to teach them more complex language. For example, if the child says “baby”, you say, “pretty baby” or “baby sleeps”. It is helpful to try and add **one or two more words** that they can say.



Child says:	You say:
“big car”	“Yes! Big <b>red</b> car.”
“oof”	“The <b>dog</b> says, <b>woof!</b> ”
“Her a pretty lady”	“Yes, <i><b>she</b></i> is a pretty lady.”

- ✓ **Extend:** Give the child more facts related to what they have said or done. If the child says “**car**” you might say “It’s a **red** car”, and then add, “Daddy drives the **car**”, or “The **car** is driving fast!”, or “Tomorrow we will go in daddy’s **car**.” Talk about what the child is doing. They will enjoy this because it shows them that you are interested. Repeating words over and over helps build vocabulary and allows you to model the correct sounds in the word.
- ✓ **Label or Name:** Everything has a name; use it. Name the objects or actions the child needs to know. Reading a book with them provides an opportunity for you to name objects or actions. The child will hear and learn new words in many daily routines.

*Adapted from “Follow Their Lead” by KidTalk.on.ca*



## Week 2: Allowing your child to take the lead - Continued



- ☐ Snacks and water
- ☐ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
- ☐ Craft supplies
- ☐ Circle time book and Props
- ☐ Attendance sheet
- ☐ Name tags
- ☐ Weekly give-away: ball
- ☐ Weekly strategy/homework sheet
- ☐ Selected resource sheets from Appendices I to III

Continue using the strategies presented in Week 1 with the families. Continue to highlight the importance of face-to-face interactions with their child, labelling sounds and gestures as well as the use of communication temptations to increase communication.

The goal of week 2 is to increase the group's comfort level with the weekly routine, each other as well as the strategies presented in the previous week.

Remember, a child who is given the opportunity to take the lead in their play will pay more attention and be more engaged if they choose the activity or toy.

As you begin to get to know the families, parents may begin to share personal details of their family life, challenges with their child's development or behaviour, etc. As you observe the participants and with the information parents divulge to you, begin to provide community resources and support to the families in the program as needed. Prior to suggesting resources to the family, ensure that you have a basic relationship with them and that they are receptive to your feedback. Some families may require more time in the program before they are open to such suggestions.



## Week 3: Imitating and interpreting to build communication



- ☐ Snacks and water
- ☐ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
- ☐ Craft supplies
- ☐ Circle time book and props
- ☐ Attendance sheet
- ☐ Name tags
- ☐ Weekly give-away: scarf
- ☐ Weekly strategy/homework sheet
- ☐ Selected resource sheets from Appendices I to III

**Imitate:** Echoing the child's words or vocalizations and copying gestures.

Imitating helps children learn from others, express their interests, share an emotion and promotes turn-taking.

Imitating helps:

- ✓ you connect with the child more easily
- ✓ the child know that you are interested in what they say and do
- ✓ gives the child a chance to imitate you

**Do what the child does. Say what the child says.**

**Interpret:** Interpreting is listening to what the child says or does and saying it back to them clearly and slowly.

Another way to think about interpreting is to “say it as the child would if they could”. Look around and use the environment to help find clues. This will help you uncover what the child wants to say.

Examples:

1. If the child is sitting at the play dough table and says “oh” while holding the play dough, you could model: “Yes, **play dough**.” Highlight the word **play dough** by saying it clearly and slowly.
2. While reading a book together, the child says “I **go** to school yesterday”. Repeat back to them: “Yes, you **went** to school yesterday”. Highlight the word **went** by saying it clearly and slowly.
3. You offer a child a piece of apple and they shake their head from side to side and say “nuh, nuh, nuh”. You say:” No apple.”

When repeating and emphasizing a word back to the child clearly and slowly, maintain eye contact with them. This will cue them to attempt to repeat the word again. If the child chooses to not repeat the word, continue the activity by inserting the word as often as possible during natural conversation. Do not insist that the child repeat the word.

Children are quite good at letting adults know if their message has been understood. If you did not interpret correctly, try again. Words are not always easy to understand as children develop their speech and language. You may not always be able to ‘uncover’ each message.

The most important thing is that you try. Let them know that you are listening. When possible, try to get the child to show you what they are talking about.

This will help with their frustration, allows them to get their message across and shows that you are listening and trying to understand. Try to distract them with another activity to reduce the frustration.



## Week 4: Tempting your child to communicate



- ☐ Snacks and water
- ☐ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
- ☐ Craft supplies
- ☐ Circle time book and Props
- ☐ Attendance sheet
- ☐ Name tags
- ☐ Weekly give-away: wind-up toy
- ☐ Weekly strategy/homework sheet
- ☐ Selected resource sheets from Appendices I to III

Communication temptations provide more opportunities and makes communication fun and interesting. When you provide opportunities, the child is more likely to understand the power of communication, initiate conversation more often and learn more vocabulary.

Communication temptations can easily be set up in any situation or environment. The key is to think ahead and wait for the child to initiate communication or to signal they need help.

**\*\*Refer to page 52 for a step-by-step guide to introducing Communication Temptations.**

Ideas for Communication Temptations during *The Chat Room Program*:

- ✓ Set out the water table with toys in your program but do not fill it up with water.
- ✓ Set out a slide/climber and allow the children a few turns to climb and slide. Then, innocently stand in front of the children to block access to the ladder/slide. Wait for the children to respond.
- ✓ Set out paint or glue pots and 'forget' to add paintbrushes or glue sticks.
- ✓ Remove one of your socks or shoes just prior to circle time and wait for the children to notice.
- ✓ Set out the garage but place all the toy cars in a clear bin with a lid that is difficult for the children to open. Place the bin next to the garage and wait. Alternately, you can place the cars on a window sill or up where the children can see but can't reach them.
- ✓ When serving drinks at snack time, fill the children's cups with an empty jug. Wait for them to respond.

## Week 5: Building communication through turn-taking



- ❑ Snacks and water
- ❑ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
- ❑ Craft supplies
- ❑ Circle time book and props
- ❑ Attendance sheet
- ❑ Name tags
- ❑ Weekly give-away: 4oz bubbles
- ❑ Weekly strategy/homework sheet
- ❑ Selected resource sheets from Appendices I to III

*“The word ‘turn’ describes whatever two people do – look at each other, gesture, make sounds or say words – to let one another know that they’re participating in the interaction.”*

*More Than Words, The Hanen Program*

By allowing a child to lead, you will notice there are many natural opportunities for turn-taking in your interactions.

For example: A parent is tickling their child. The child may be looking towards the parent and giggling to let them know they are enjoying the activity. If the parent stops tickling the child suddenly, the child may grab the parent’s hands and pull them closer towards them to show they want to continue. The parent understands this cue and continues to tickle the child again. The parent and the child are taking turns in their interactions with each other.

Taking turns with one another may come in the form of:

- ✓ Gestures or actions (reaching, pointing, turning away, giving a toy, taking your hand so you to continue to tickle them, etc.)
- ✓ Facial expressions (looking at you, smiling, etc.)
- ✓ Sounds, words or conversations (giggling, crying, grunting, words, comments, etc.)
- ✓ Social games such as ‘peek-a-boo’
- ✓ Playing with a toy, especially one that is hard to operate on their own

Turn-taking can take place:

- ✓ When the child is requesting something they really want.
- ✓ While singing songs.
- ✓ When the child is very motivated during daily routines such as mealtime.
- ✓ During physical activities. (e.g., playing catch, tag, ect.)

- ✓ While reading books, especially if they have flaps, sounds or are repetitive.
- ✓ When greeting someone during familiar situations. (e.g., waving or saying 'bye')

Try to find as many natural opportunities for turn-taking in your day as possible and keep the activity going for as long as the child is engaged. At first, children may need a little help to identify when it's their turn. You may need to:

- ✓ Physically cue the child by touching their shoulder, arm, leg or back.
- ✓ Taking the child's hands and helping them clap or wave goodbye as you say the word.
- ✓ Give a verbal cue such as "Your turn." or say "shoes".
- ✓ Give them an expectant look to indicate you are waiting for them to communicate.
- ✓ Pause – "The cow goes [pause] moo!" \*Ensure you keep eye contact with the child.
- ✓ Slow down to indicate their turn during a song. (e.g., "Old MacDonald had a f-a-r-m [slowly say 'farm' as you look expectantly at them], EIEIO)
- ✓ Say the first part of the word, phrase or sentence such as "boo..." (book) and wait for the child to complete it.
- ✓ Show them physical objects and offer choice questions. (e.g., "apple or cheese" or "blue shirt or yellow shirt?"")
- ✓ Set up communication temptations in the environment.
- ✓ Allow the child to fill-in-the-blank. (e.g., "You're eating a...")
- ✓ Model words or sentences that they have difficulty with.

## When playing together...

Use the four letters of the word **R.O.C.K.** to help remember the most important things you must do when you play with your child.

- R.** Repeat what you say and do.
- O** Offer opportunities for your child to take his turn.
- C.** Cue your child to take his turn.
- K.** Keep it fun! Keep it going!

*More Than Words Manual, The Hanen Program, [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org)*



## Week 6: Celebrating success and review of all weekly strategies



- ❑ Snacks, water
- ❑ Plates, cups, cutlery, napkins
- ❑ Craft supplies
- ❑ Circle time book and props
- ❑ Attendance sheet
- ❑ Photo album for each child
- ❑ Name tags
- ❑ Photo prints of each child during the program (approx 12-15 of each child)
- ❑ Pre-Post evaluation
- ❑ Custom photo album for each family (see Appendix VI for template)
- ❑ Weekly give-away: homemade sensory book or felt story
- ❑ Weekly Strategy/homework sheet
- ❑ Selected resource sheets from Appendices I to III

The last session of *The Chat Room Program* is an opportunity for families to continue to put into practice all of the strategies presented in the previous weeks. This week's session should resemble a typical community playgroup in routine as well as in access to all learning centres in the playroom at all times.

In previous weeks, it was recommended to limit the number of toys in the playroom to foster increased communication opportunities. By this time in the program, children as well as their parents are feeling more comfortable with one another and will be interacting with more ease. Set up the program as you would for a typical community playgroup with a variety of toys on the shelves and all learning centres open throughout the program.

Facilitators should filter through the playroom for the duration of the session, observing the interactions between the children as well as with their parents; providing feedback and reminding parents of the strategies practiced in previous weeks. Build on their interactions by providing ideas on other situations in their daily routine where they could use the strategies.

As you interact with the families, remember to highlight any progress the parent has made in their interactions with the child as well as the child's progress in their communication, social skills, or confidence and independence during the session.



Families are asked to complete the Post-Evaluation document during this last session so that facilitators can evaluate the participants' progress as well as awareness of the strategies and resources available in the community. Facilitators may designate 10-15 minutes for the parents to complete the evaluation while facilitators and volunteers supervise the children. Alternatively, parents may



complete it during the session at their leisure.

Custom photo books are handed out to each family at the end of the session to highlight interactions, strategies and activities throughout the program as well as to remind parents of the many daily strategies that support communication development. Children love to look through photo albums, especially when they see pictures of themselves. Parents can use the photo book regularly at home with their child to talk about the various activities they experienced together during the program.

\*Refer to Appendix VI for a template of cards to insert into each child's photo album.

Remember to encourage families to continue practicing the strategies in their daily routines and to participate in programs and activities in the community so that their child continues to practice their skills.

**Examples:**

- ❑ Community playgroups
- ❑ Story time at the public library
- ❑ Visit to a local park
- ❑ Set up a play date with a friend or with a family who participated in the program
- ❑ Participate in religious gatherings
- ❑ Participate in community events

