Caregivers' Experiences Participating in virtual *More Than Words*® programs: Implications for virtual service delivery

Lauren Denusik[1], Michelle Servais[2], Kathryn Rollins[1], Danielle Glista[1], Sheila Moddie[1], Janis Oram Cardy[1], Elaine Weitzman[3], Barbara Jane Cunningham[1]

[1]Western University, [2]TVCC, [3]The Hanen Centre

Background

- Hanen *More Than Words*® teaches parents/caregivers strategies to support children's social communication development
- The virtual version was developed, but not piloted prior to COVID-19
- One recent study on families' experiences reported high parent satisfaction and improved parental confidence interacting with children with the virtual program (Garnett et al., 2022)
- It is not yet known whether/how program components transferred to the virtual environment

Current Study: Research Question and Methods

Research Question: What are the experiences of parents and caregivers who participated in the virtual *More Than Words*® program?
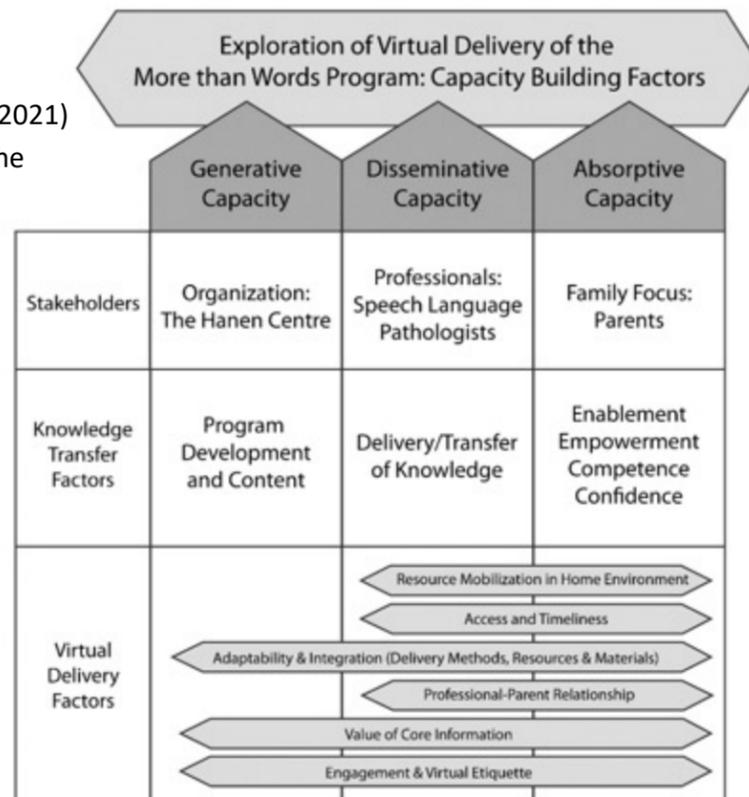
Participants:
- 21 individuals (parents, grandparents, extended family) from Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia (22-58 years)
- Children ranged in age from 18 – 54 months (17 male; 4 female)
- 14 children had ASD, others had social communication concerns or suspected ASD

Procedures:
- Virtual semi-structured interviews (March-Aug 2021)
- Questions structured according to a modified the *Dynamic Knowledge Transfer Capacity model* (Parent et al., 2007)
- Considered the generative, disseminative, and absorptive capacities of the virtual program
- Identifies six virtual delivery factors to consider

Six Steps for Analysis:
1. Developing initial codes
2. Data Familiarization
3. Coding
4. Review of coding
5. Identifying patterns of meaning
6. Member check

Exploration of Virtual Delivery of the More than Words Program: Capacity Building Factors

If you have any questions, please contact Lauren Denusik at ldenusik@uwo.ca

Results

Experience Participating from Home
- *Benefits*: convenience (e.g., not commuting, paying for gas), more time with family, available at home if needed
- *Drawbacks*: distractions (e.g., other children, pets, family members)
- *Undecided*: childcare (a benefit for some and a drawback for others)

"My main takeaway was that other people, I don't feel were as focused in the program as they would have been if you were in a classroom and didn't have your at home distractions around you"

Access to *More Than Words*® Program
- *Benefits*: previous experience with Zoom
- *Drawbacks*: length of sessions (2.5 hours)
- *Undecided*: timing of group sessions (e.g., evenings versus during the day), issues with technology or internet connection (for some)

"it's a lot of information to just be sitting in front of a computer for two and a half hours so that part of it was a little difficult"

Delivery Methods and Program Materials
- *Benefits*: breakout rooms to connect with other participants, individual time with the SLP
- *Drawbacks*: feasibility of work in addition to sessions (e.g., completing forms, textbook readings), challenging to capture home interactions on video for many

"it was a little difficult especially because I have a toddler that likes to run around all over the place so it was hard to always have to hold the camera and try to be in it, do the activity with him."

The SLP-Caregiver Relationship
- *Benefits*: feelings of empowerment and being heard by the SLP, comfortable environment created by SLP so participants could share and participate, SLPs being caring and compassionate

"The speech-language pathologist really empowered us to do it and made us feel like we were equipped, we were the best people to do the job."

New Skills Learned
- *Benefits*: new strategies for interacting and encouraging communication, strategies easy to implement at home
- *Undecided*: Strategies not applicable all children (varied by developmental stage)

"I'm blown away, how much I've learned and the difference in two and a bit months like. It's not hard to do. It's very basic, simple strategies that you can do at home. The world of difference it makes is just astounding."

Virtual Program Engagement
- *Benefits*: connecting to share common experiences, informal learning from other participants (e.g., resources, toys, strategies), social connection beyond the program
- *Drawbacks*: engagement opportunities differed from in-person (e.g., no opportunity for small talk during breaks)

"The first class I think everyone was crying because everyone's going around talking about their kiddos and, yeah, just realizing finally you have people."

Conclusion and Future Directions

- Overall positive learning experiences, but families' recommendations for modifications to improve virtual delivery.
- Next steps including sharing feedback and findings with The Hanen Centre for consideration
- Future work will explore children's outcomes during the virtual program