



Pathways to Professional Development

Building Foundations in Infant
and Early Childhood Mental Health

How do children learn to understand and use language?

And why do some children struggle with this developmental capacity?

Sima Gerber, Ph.D., CCC
Queens College
April, 2025

Pathways to Professional Development: Building Foundations in Infant and Early Childhood Mental



Pathways to Professional Development was developed to build workforce competence and professional preparedness for clinicians working in the perinatal and birth to 5 periods

- 21 foundational webinars focused on the foundations of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.
 - Provided live virtually
 - Recorded for viewing as LMS modules
- Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health And Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC:0-5) offered virtually and in-person.
- View all offerings here → <https://www.ctacny.org/special-initiatives/pathways-to-professional-development/>

The aim is to develop a well prepared and competent workforce trained to identify and address mental health concerns early, to **promote** awareness of mental health, to **prevent** long-term problems and to **intervene** to help children stay on developmental track.

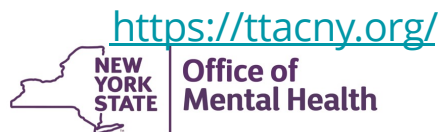



Who we are



These trainings are funded by the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) and provided by the New York Center for Child Development (NYCCD) in collaboration with CTAC.

- **New York Center for Child Development** (NYCCD) has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York with a long history of providing system-level expertise to inform policy and support the field of Early Childhood Mental Health through training and direct practice.
- **NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research** houses the Community and Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers (CTAC & MCTAC), Peer TAC, and the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE). These TA centers offer clinic, business, and system transformation supports statewide to all behavioral healthcare providers across NYS.
- **NYCCD and McSilver** also run the **NYC Perinatal & Early Childhood Mental Health Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC)** which offers ongoing training and technical assistance for those working during the perinatal period to age 5





How do children learn to understand and use language?

And why do some children struggle with this developmental capacity?

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Learning objectives



- ***Identify the foundational capacities that lead to a child's ability to comprehend and produce language.***
- ***Identify "red flags" of possible speech/language/communication differences suggestive of a referral to a Speech Language Pathologist.***
- ***Learn best practices for facilitating language and communication development.....regardless of your discipline!***



My journey



- **Developmental Language Models**

 - Social-pragmatic models*

 - Form-Content-Use models*

 - Intentionality Model*

- **DIR/FT**

 - Interdisciplinary Model of development, assessment, and intervention*

- **Mental Health Supervision**

 - An SLP learning more about the emotional life of the child, the caregiver, and the clinician*



Why is the understanding of language development relevant for ALL professionals working with children with challenges?



Language is the primary tool that humans use to

MAKE MEANING

MAKE RELATIONSHIPS

Nelson, 2007



What is (not) language ?

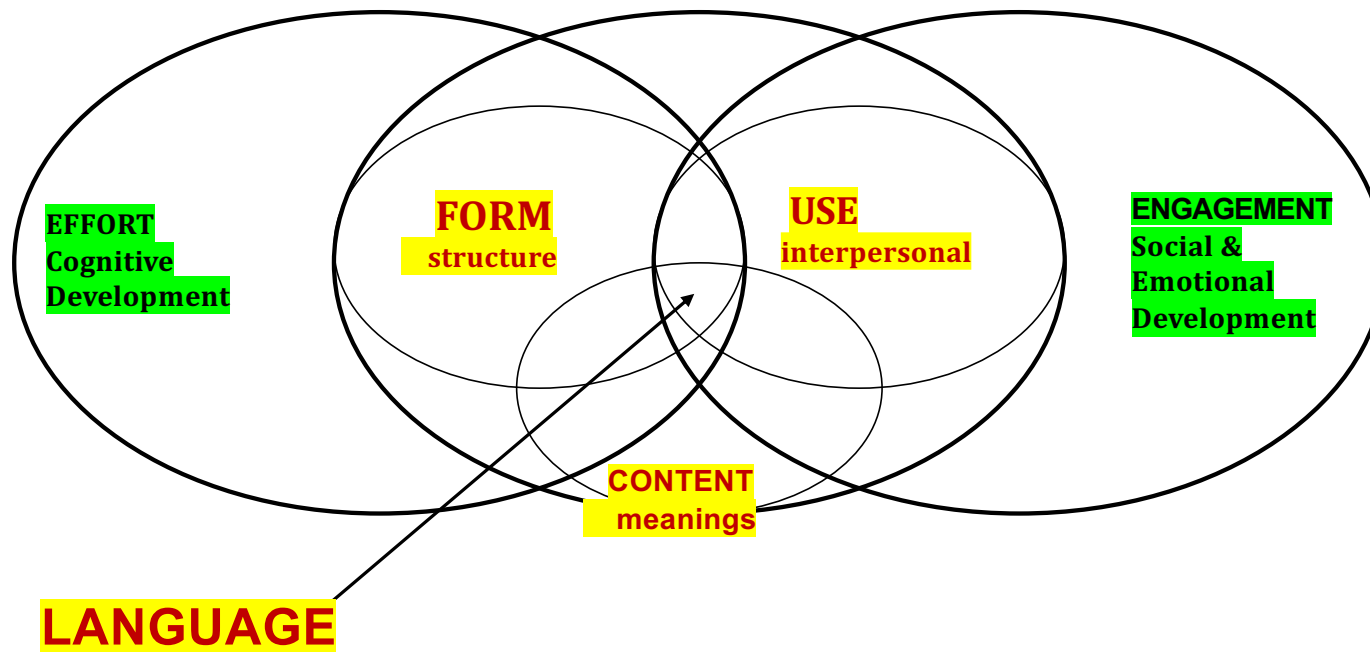


- **Language** ≠ speech sounds

- **Language** ≠ talking

The Intentionality Model

Bloom and Tinker, 2001



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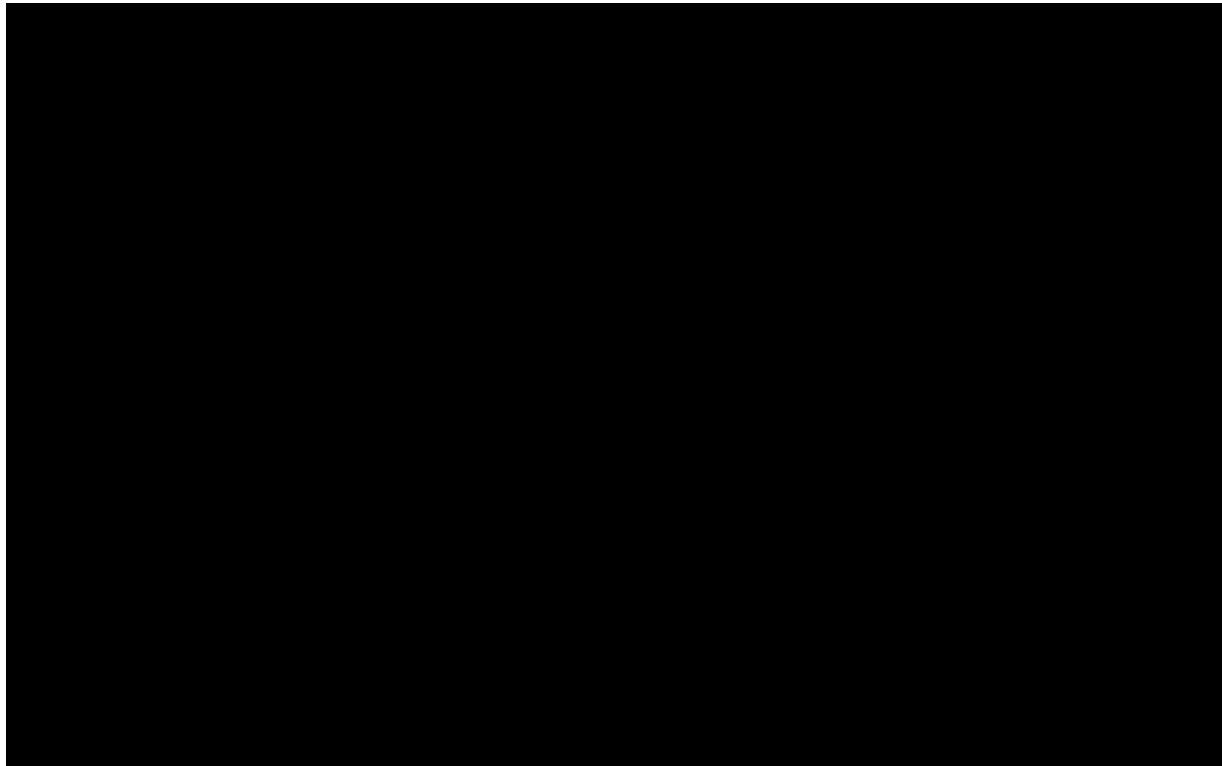


- *The child's ability to **understand** the intentions of others by “reading”, comprehending and responding to the partner's facial expressions, vocalizations, gestures and words. The child begins to understand that others are intentional and that their attention, emotion and behaviors can be followed and shared.*
- *The child's ability to **express** her intentions or the shared goal of her behavior as well as the feelings, beliefs, desires, and plans about that goal. Intentionality can be expressed **affectively, linguistically, and by actions**.*

Tomasello, 2005



Intentionality



Gerber, 2025

Comprehension Production

**sounds/
words**

grammar

**Language and
communication challenges**

conversation

meanings



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**NEW YORK
STATE**

**Office of
Mental Health**

**CENTER FOR CHILD
DEVELOPMENT**



Categories of language challenges



- **Late talker**
- **Developmental language disorder**
- **Intellectual disability**
- **Autism spectrum disorder**
- **Social pragmatic communication disorder**

A contemporary paradigm for understanding the child's developing ability to comprehend and produce language*

DOLLI – Developmental observation – links to intervention

Regulation→

Engagement → (Relationship)

Intentionality→

Ideas/Meanings →

Comprehension →

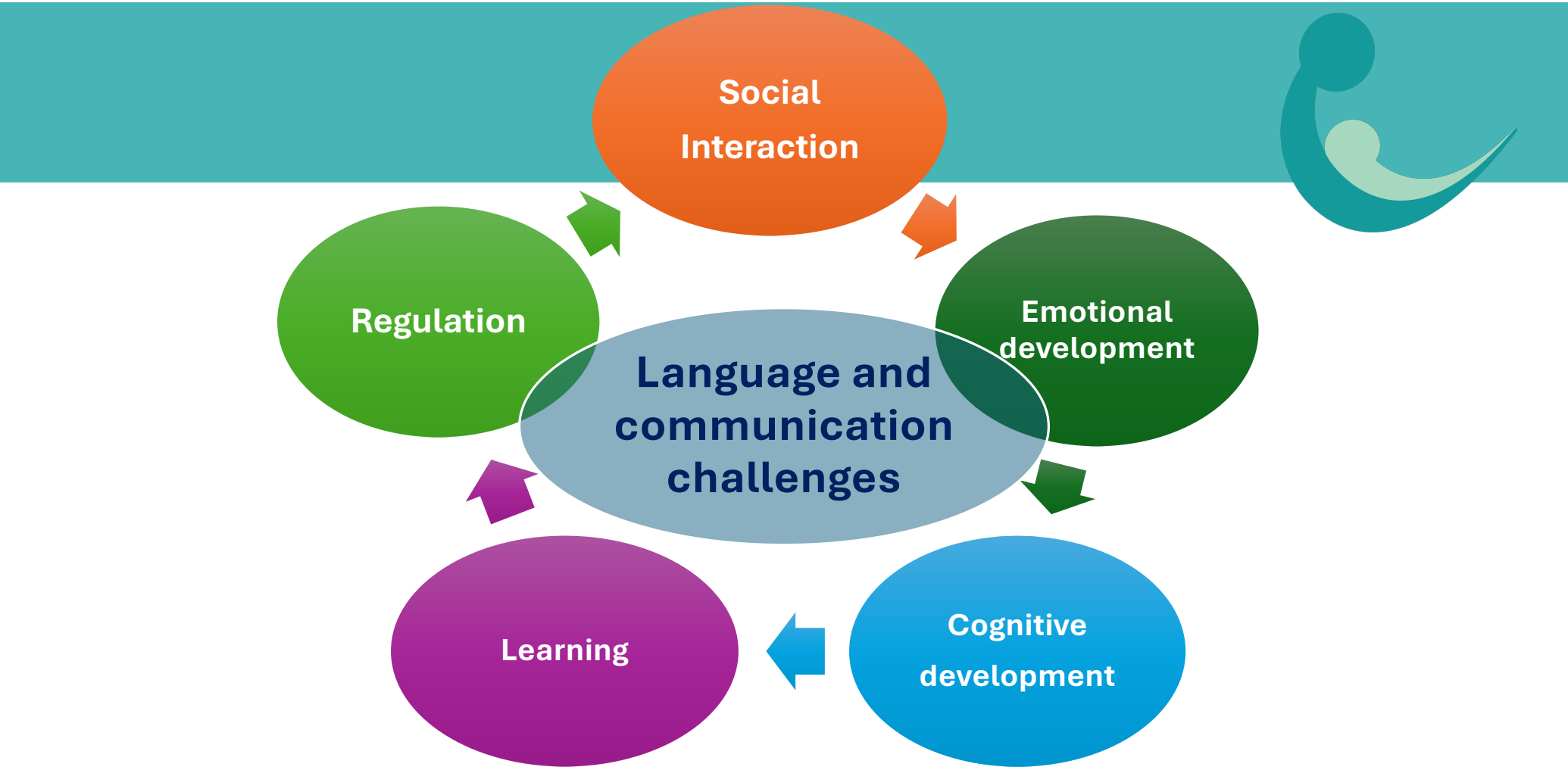
Production

*Gerber & Ricamato, 2023**

What areas of development does language impact?

What is the impact of a language and communication challenge on a child's development and interpersonal life?





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*Gerber & Ricamato, 2023**

Late talkers



- **Master clinician**



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*Gerber & Ricamato, 2023**

CG – Developmental delay





A contemporary paradigm for understanding the child's developing ability to comprehend and produce language*

Regulation →

Engagement → (Relationship)

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Comprehension →

Production

*Gerber & Ricamato, 2023**

AW - ASD



- **DOLLI (2023)**



JC - ASD



- **1st video**



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ctac

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Jolie – 21 months



Emma - ASD



- [Kidsattuned.org](https://kidsattuned.org)



Strategies that prioritize engagement and intentionality →

- *Affective engagement/emotionally present*
- *Attunement/empathic responsiveness*
- *The child's thoughts and feelings lead the way*
- **Contingent responding**
- **Everything counts as communication – conventional or unconventional**
- **Language and communication well-matched to child's meanings and intentions**



*In order to address developmental integration for children with challenges, we have to begin with contemporary paradigms of **child development (parent-child relationship)** and then look to paradigms that relate to the development of language comprehension and production.*





Jokihaka, etc. al. (2022). Cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between quality of parent-child interactions and language ability in pre-school children with developmental language disorder. *JSHR*, 65.

....particularly, a parent-child relationship characterized by connectedness, belonging, and shared positive affect, despite significant language impairment, can serve to encourage receptive language development.

quality of the interactive relationship



What goals did we model for J's Mom?



- Enhance opportunities to engage in back and forth interactions with Jolie, related to her interests, e.g., sound play and tapping – engagement/ shared affect/ joint attention
- Imitate Jolie's actions and vocalizations to increase reciprocity – engagement/ mirroring
- Respond to all Jolie's communicative attempts, behavioral, non-verbal, vocal, or verbal, with a pragmatically-matched response – intentionality/ affective attunement/ contingent responding
- Follow Jolie's lead relative to play choices, even when repetitive – ideas and meanings/communicative power and initiation
- Reduce the lexical and grammatical complexity of the language directed to Jolie – comprehension/linguistic attunement

What were NOT goals?



- **Imitation of words** – ‘say boat’
- **Elicited eye contact** – ‘Look at me’
- **Frequent question asking**– ‘Where is the boat?’ ‘What are you doing?’
- **Following directions** – ‘Put the boat in the water.’

JC



- **2nd video**



Jolie – 30 months



S. Gerber, 2022

Emma with markers and blocks

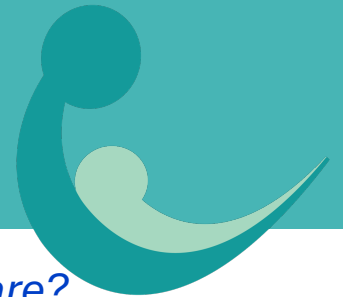


- [Kidsattuned.org](https://kidsattuned.org)



Pause...!

If a child has a challenge in language comprehension or language production – possible outcomes:



- *She may have difficulty responding to questions – Why don't you want to share?*
- *She may have difficulty following directions – 'First put your backpacks away, then get your crayons, and sit at the round table.'*
- *She may have difficulty entering into peer interactions – Less preferred play partners**
- *She may have difficulty processing her emotions and others' emotions*
- *She may not understand your verbal interpretations/comments about her behavior – (e.g. Looks like you're angry with your brother)*



- *She may have difficulty regulating behavior...dysregulation may be a result of an inability to understand or formulate language*
- *She may have difficulty pretending – play and language are both symbolic behaviors and often the child's underlying symbolic problem affects both domains*
- *She may have difficulty developing new schemas – cognition underlies language and then language drives thinking – executive functions*
- *She may have difficulty paying attention – if you don't understand what is being said, what is there to pay attention to?*



The Hananen CentreTM



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Hanen programs



For parents (and professionals)

- ***It takes two to talk – Language delay***
- ***More than words - ASD***

For educators

Learning language and loving it



Asha.org



COMMUNICATION MILESTONES 19 to 24 Months



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What should my child be able to do?



- Uses and understands at least 50 different words for food, toys, animals, and body parts. Speech may not always be clear—like **du** for “shoe” or **dah** for “dog.”
- Puts two or more words together—like **more water** or **go outside**.
- Follows two-step directions—like “Get the spoon, and put it on the table.”
- Uses words like **me**, **mine**, and **you**.
- Uses words to ask for help.
- Uses possessives, like **Daddy’s sock**.

Speech sound development



SLP for the Non-SLP practitioner

Questions to ask yourself



- *Does this child have a language and/or communication problem which is contributing to the challenges I am seeing?*
- *Does this child have the developmental foundations that lead to the ability to comprehend and produce language?*
- *How can I modify my language (quantity, complexity, contingency) and non-verbal interactions so that my goals can be achieved?*
- *How can I help the parents modify their language and communication to match their child's current language comprehension stage?*
- *Should I speak with a developmental SLP to more fully understand the child's language problems and how these challenges might impact my work with the child and the family?*

