

## The Role of Speech-Language Pathologists in Autism Spectrum Disorder

### Position Statement

It is the position of Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC) that speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) play a critical role on interprofessional autism spectrum disorder (ASD) service teams. S-LPs provide specialized assessment and intervention services to address deficits in social communication and social interaction, which are core features of ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

### Rationale

Public awareness and attention to ASD has increased in the last decade, leading to an abundance of information, and misinformation, regarding intervention approaches. Service delivery and treatment models for ASD also vary widely within and across provinces and territories (Shepherd & Waddell, 2015). As a result, many families report feeling frustrated, confused and overwhelmed when faced with decisions regarding ASD services.

Since ASD is a complex, heterogeneous disorder that changes over time, SAC advocates for access to a variety of evidence-informed intervention approaches. Across Canada, there is currently a movement toward single intervention approaches for ASD. This contradicts evidence that best practice in ASD is collaborative, customized to the individual's needs and informed by developmental and behavioural principles (National Research Council, 2011; National Standards Project, 2009, 2015; Ospina et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2017; Rubin, 2017; Schreiber et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2014; Zwaigenbaum et al., 2015).

S-LPs contribute specialized expertise in all aspects of verbal and nonverbal communicative functioning and social interaction, which often underlie behavioural challenges. Yet increasingly, S-LPs are excluded from ASD service teams. SAC advocates that the unique contributions of S-LPs are fundamental to effective ASD program planning and intervention. S-LPs ensure functional, holistic and developmentally-appropriate communication intervention for people with ASD across the lifespan (Paul, 2008; Rubin, 2017).

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S-LPs are experts in normal and disordered language, social skills, feeding, speech and functional communication. They meet rigorous academic and clinical standards in these and other related areas, including learning theory, general development, augmentative and alternative communication, as well as principles of behavioural science related to communication. S-LPs remain at the forefront of ASD research, assessment and intervention and have an essential role in the differential diagnosis of ASD (Prizant, 2017).

S-LPs are often among the first health professionals to identify symptoms of ASD and refer individuals for diagnostic testing and other services. S-LPs provide early intervention - often before diagnosis - to support the development of joint attention and early social communication skills, which have been shown to improve outcomes and quality of life for people with ASD (Kasari et al., 2008; Murza et al., 2016; Paul, 2008).

S-LPs continue to help people with ASD of all ages develop new skills and generalize these skills across social settings. This can facilitate access to gainful employment, as well as support the development of interpersonal relationships.

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