Kyler Clark interacts with his mom, Naomi, as she implements strategies she learned in the CPD's "It Takes Two to Talk" class.

It's hard enough to communicate with a toddler, but it can feel almost impossible when that child has a developmental delay or disability. Now, there is help for frustrated parents.

The Up to 3 program at Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities has started a class to teach parents how to help their children communicate and connect with the world. Eight parents are currently enrolled in the class.

The "It Takes Two to Talk" parent training program was designed by the Hanen Centre, a not-for-profit charitable organization in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and is taught by Up to 3 speech-language pathologists Jessica Nielsen and Jocelyn Matheson.

"This is a great course to learn how to teach children to communicate," Nielsen said.

Through video clips and discussions during the classroom sessions, parents learn practical and powerful strategies on how to turn everyday activities into opportunities for their child to learn language.

“I honestly thought this was going to help just him,” Naomi Clark said about her 2½-year-old son, Kyler. “The class has helped me see how easy it is for me to provide learning opportunities. Nothing in the program is hard to implement into your daily routine and most are things I’m already doing that just need a little tweaking. It's also easy enough for me to teach my husband, which helps him help our son.”

The speech-language pathologists record the interactions between parent and child during periodic home visits and the videos are played during class. Nielsen said watching the videos helps parents to see what they’re doing well or what they could have done differently. They are also able to give each other feedback.

“They throw ideas back and forth when they come back in,” Nielsen said.

It’s nice to relate to other parents, even if their kids have different delays or disabilities, said Jenny Cook, who has two young sons on the autism spectrum.

“It’s a comfortable setting,” Cook said. “You don’t feel looked down on or judged, because we’re all in the same boat. You get input from both sides, the teachers and the other parents in the class.”

Parents learn how to assess how their child is communicating right now and figure out the next steps to take. They learn how to engage their child in back-and-forth conversations, even before the child can talk, and how to fine-tune what they say so their child can understand them and learn new words and ideas.

“My son is showing an improvement,” Clark said. “He isn’t talking yet, but he is starting to use sounds with more meaning and learning more signs.”

Cook said she and her husband don’t use the techniques much with Owen, 4½, because there’s not a lot of down time with him. Owen attends the ASSERT preschool in the mornings and the school district preschool in the afternoons, then has home therapy after that. They have seen some improvement with William, 2½.

“He’s not interactive,” Cook said. “He doesn’t play with you, but he likes having you there and he really does respond pretty well.”

Jared and Emily Michaelsen’s son J.J. is 2½ and has hydrocephaly and spina bifida.
“Before class, we didn’t know how to interact with him,” said Jared Michaelsen. “It’s a way to figure out how to interact with him more, so he could start learning to speak better and communicate with us so we know what he wants.”

Emily Michaelsen said if they hadn’t taken the class, J.J. probably wouldn’t be as communicative as he is.

“He’s more talkative, he’s more expressive now,” she said. “He’s learning words every week. We didn’t know how to play with him to get that result.”

For more information, contact Jessica Nielsen at 797-3826 or Jocelyn Matheson at 797-8168.

For more information on Up to 3, click here.

For more information on ASSERT, click here.