

Effective talk with babies

One of the best pieces of advice for parents and practitioners wanting to communicate more effectively with babies, is to try and 'be in the moment' with them, making the most of every moment of attention.



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FOR MOST children, learning to talk seems like an effortless process. However, it is the early interaction between adults and babies that lays the foundations for communication as a whole, and culminates in talking. This interaction needs to take place as part of a loving relationship, which in most cases will initially be between mother and baby.

Other adults, including father and grandparents, play an important part in early communication, but it is vital that baby forms an attachment and bonds with his mother, in order to be able to form relationships with other people. If baby goes to daycare at an early age, then the practitioners who care for him will play a crucial part in helping him form new close relationships and to communicate with other people.

Natural interactions

Many mothers find that they naturally know how to play and talk with their baby, while their partners often need to be helped to understand why it is important and how to do it. Sue Gerhardt, in her book, *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*, argues that the baby's parent or carer should be 'tuned in and emotionally available to the child'. This process of attunement starts at birth.

It is often assumed that all mothers will automatically start chatting, playing and having fun with baby, using the particular type of exaggerated tone of voice and gobbledygook that researchers call 'motherese'. We might also assume that all practitioners will engage the babies they care for in this type of chat – either as part of routine caring for children or involving them in planned sessions.

However, the early relationship between parents and child can falter, or in some cases not get going at all. Difficulties can arise if baby or mother are unwell immediately after the birth – for example, if the child needs to spend time in an incubator or receive

special care. In this situation the baby may not be able to have the prolonged contact needed to build a bond.

Children with additional learning and communication needs – for example, with Down syndrome or Autistic Spectrum Disorder, may not be able to respond to the adults' efforts to communicate, and this can have an impact on the early relationship. Post Natal Depression, or more chronic depression, can also impact on the mother's ability to communicate and bond with her baby.

Sometimes, parents try too hard to stimulate their baby, and the infant can react by turning away and seeming to 'shut down' in the face of being bombarded by speech and bright toys being waved around by parents who seem to be almost forcing a response.

Practitioner support

Practitioners also often need support to increase their understanding of how to communicate with other people's babies, and how to develop the skills needed to engage and 'tune in' to them. We also need to be realistic that the experience of having two or three children to care for at home differs significantly from just having one – parents with larger families have less time for uninterrupted play and chat with their young baby.

Likewise, practitioners rarely get a chance to spend time with one child and are unable to give them total attention for more than a few minutes, without being interrupted by other children. So, how can we help adults and babies tune in to each other and, most importantly, who is available to help this process?

Early relationships

I got the answers from Debbie Brace and Bhavna Acharya, who jointly lead the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project in the Borough of Hounslow, to the west of London. Debbie originally trained as a primary school teacher, and has worked as a childminder, while Bhavna is a speech and language therapist in private practice.

As part of Debbie's work for ECaT, and as an independent consultant, she teaches parents and practitioners to learn the skills they need to develop positive early relationships with young children and to communicate successfully with them. The sessions

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for parents, known as Baby Talk and Play, originally took place in children's centres, but Debbie now leads them in her home.

Debbie recognises that family life is busy, that it can at times be quite chaotic and is often very noisy: 'We can't expect parents to be able to spend extended amounts of time communicating with their children. Life has a lot of other calls on our time, particularly if we have more than one child.'

In the moment

Debbie suggests that parents should aim to 'be in the moment' with their children. By this she means making the most of times during the day when they are able to communicate fully with their baby. Most time with very young babies is spent feeding, changing, bathing, putting down to sleep, and so on, and parents can give their full attention during these intimate moments.

All these moments during the day (and unfortunately during the night) can add up to a substantial amount of time.

Debbie explained that 'being in the moment' is part of the process that psychologists call 'attunement'. 'If a parent is really in tune with his or her baby, then the child will not feel desperate for attention. She will know that in

those particular few minutes, even if it is when having her nappy changed, mummy or daddy will be zoning in on baby's feelings. These moments are important because they convey a message of emotional bonding. Language development will emerge from this early emotional connection and communication.'

Debbie is very clear about what she wants to teach parents in order to support their relationship with their child. Each Baby Talk and Play session has a theoretical focus and practical fun activities with parents and their babies. There is also coffee and biscuits for the parents and a great deal of discussion about babies and communication. Debbie believes in being positive, and is always looking for parental responses to their baby's behaviour that she can praise and explore with the group.

'There's no point in me telling parents about what they are doing wrong. Parents who come on the course often say that they know what they ought to be doing – for example, singing songs or sharing books, but they are not sure why. We look at what the parents are already doing that baby responds to positively, and build on this, and explain why what they are doing is important.'

One crucial message is the power of waiting for a child's response to adult stimulation. Some parents

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seem to think that they should be bringing their baby up to a constant pitch of excitement, leading to the child feeling overloaded. In a group parachute game the parents will lift up the parachute and exclaim, 'aahh!'

Some children will react positively, while others will be startled. The activity is repeated, but this time the parents are encouraged to stay very quiet. More often than not, the children will become excited and exclaim, 'aahh!' The parents can then respond to the children's excitement – for example, by asking: 'Shall we do it again?' This helps parents learn to be more responsive by waiting.

Transfer into practice

These same principles can be transferred directly into practice within daycare settings. Debbie leads Baby Talk and Play training courses in settings, working directly with staff and children, as part of everyday the activities. Staff film each other, and provide positive feedback on what aspects of interaction went well. Naturally, there will be much that needs improving, but as with the parents' sessions, Debbie does not focus on the negative. By looking closely at what an adult did well, subsequent sessions invariably improve.

Practitioners in the baby room at Little Rainbows Nursery in Hounslow reported dramatic changes in their interaction with the children. They became very aware of the number of questions they were asking, and how little time they gave children to respond, before asking supplementary questions.

With Debbie's input, the adults were able to reduce their questioning, and just like the parents, increase their ability to wait for children to respond.

Key points

- For most children, learning to talk seems like an effortless process. However, it is the early interaction between adults and babies that lays the foundations for communication as a whole, and culminates in talking
- This interaction needs to take place as part of a loving relationship, which in most cases will initially be between mother and baby
- Other adults, including father and grandparents, play an important part in early communication, but it is vital that baby forms an attachment and bonds with his mother, in order to be able to form relationships with other people. If baby goes to daycare at an early age, then the practitioners who care for him will play a crucial part in helping him form new close relationships and to communicate with other people

Staff also commented that they have become less controlling in their interactions, and are able to respond to what children do, rather than feeling that they always have to provide stimulation.

Along with colleague Bhavna Acharya, Debbie also leads a course for practitioners working with older children, called Positive Interaction. This course explores similar principles to Baby Talk and Play. Responses from course delegates and their managers indicate an overwhelming improvement in staff knowledge of communication and significant impacts on practitioner-child interaction.

Having attended the Positive Interaction course myself, I could see an immediate effect on my own work with practitioners. I had a much clearer idea of how to advise staff in baby rooms on improving their interaction with babies as part of a busy day. While leading activities in the baby room at Little Rainbows Nursery, I was much more aware of my own communication and more focused on the way that the practitioners were able to use being in the moment skills to engage the children in interaction.

We planned a discovery play session, where we hoped to engage all the children in interaction while they were exploring a large collection of shiny objects. In order to make sure that everyone could focus fully, we planned for all of the adults in the room to be involved. I fully recognise that this can be an enormous challenge, given that baby rooms are busy places – for example, with parents arriving at different times, frequent interruptions by other staff passing on important information, and babies needing to be changed.

However, by giving one adult the responsibility for dealing with interruptions throughout the session, thus freeing colleagues to be totally involved, we were able to sustain the children's involvement for up to 45 minutes. During that time, the staff and children were fully focused on each other.

When we add to the equation the staff's commitment to talking and interacting with children as part of regular activities and during intimate care for the babies, these children are getting the optimum amount of communication possible. I was so in the moment during this session that I forgot to take any photographs, and ended up with only a few badly-focused shots! eye

Useful resources

- To find out more about Baby Talk and Play, visit www.babytalkandplay.co.uk
- *What Mothers Do: Especially When it looks Like Nothing* by Naomi Stadlen, published by Piatkus, gives an insight into how parents, and mothers in particular, use everyday life activities to develop close bonds and communication with their babies.

References

Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain by Sue Gerhardt. Routledge: London