

Dances of conversation

This article explores the first steps that parent and child take together in the 'dance of conversation', an interaction that includes Parentese, which forms the foundation for children's social use of language.



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IN PART three of this series on early communication and language, we explore how babies and their carers take their first steps together in the 'dance of conversation'. This interaction, which includes the use of Parentese, is the foundation for children's social use of language and crucial for the infant's emerging sense of wellbeing.

I have a very large set of resources that I call 'The Baby Experience', which consists of six life-sized, realistic-looking newborn baby dolls and all the paraphernalia that is needed for feeding and changing babies. It always attracts a big crowd of children in early years settings, and I particularly like to use it to involve boys in role-play and to encourage quieter children to join in with play in groups.

While I am playing with my dolly I will use that special language that we reserve for babies – what linguists refer to as child-directed speech, or 'Motherese'. It goes something like this: 'Who's daddy's baby den? Who's my little baby? Who den? Is it baby? Are you daddy's special boy den?'

It has its own particular exaggerated pitch and volume, and involves a great many vocal noises and made-up words. We do it to get babies interested in us, and to make them smile and laugh. Sometimes I start talking to the children in Motherese. They either laugh, or look at me in horror. One boy was mortified: 'Stop it! I'm not a baby!' I did the same to one two-year-old girl, out of context, as she was walking past, and she said: 'Silly! My not a dog!' That confused me, until I realised that we often use this Motherese-type of talk with our pets.

Motherese, child-directed speech and proto-conversations

Since the late 1970s there has been a great deal of interest in how mothers and babies play and talk together. What emerges from research is that mothers and babies are often involved in the type of interactions that I take part in with my plastic dollies. Detailed analyses of mothers and babies show that there is an interaction, a joint venture – a dance even – between mother and child as they mess around together.

At first, it seems that mum does most of the work – trying to get baby more and more excited, until he responds by laughing and moving his arms and legs. Mum then tries again until she gets the same reaction. As baby grows he becomes the leader, with mum responding in a playful and excited way. The

play and talk also becomes louder and more robust, and mother and infant develop a repertoire, which includes mum tickling, calling baby silly names, laughing, smiling and making vocal noises.

These early interactions have been described as proto-conversations. In the same way that a prototype car is built to test out how it handles, or whether it needs adaptations before it goes into full production, the proto-conversation is a road test for later real conversations. These interactions, including Motherese, introduce many of the skills needed to have a good conversation using language when the child is older – including listening to what is being said, making a response, making eye contact, waiting, listening and turn-taking.

Having a good conversation is all about two people responding to each other. When baby is very young, parents do most of the work to get the interaction going. However, towards nine-months-old, baby is much more likely to be taking the lead.

Babies of this age are getting very mobile, and are taking an interest in pulling themselves to standing. Baby is by now interested in picking things up, and taking turns to take an object from a carer and then giving it back when asked. He is starting to get the hang of waving 'bye bye' when he is told to do so, and pointing is becoming an interesting thing to do. During this stage, baby's babbling really gets underway and this, combined with baby's growing mobility, gives parents a chance to increase their repertoire of games and interactions.

The Still Face experiment

The involvement of the baby in play and talk, where parent and child build up routines of interaction, that are almost like little dances, becomes such an important part of life for the baby that it can be quite a shock if it suddenly stops. The classic Still Face experiments show this in graphic detail.

Professor Edward Tronick and colleagues devised an experiment where a mother and her baby talked to each other, using Motherese in the natural way the baby was used to. At a given signal mum stopped talking and looked at baby with a completely still and unsmiling face. Babies under seven-months-old became confused and very quickly stopped making noises.

When this experiment was repeated with babies over seven-months-old, the baby actively tried to get



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mum's attention by making noises and movements, clapping hands and trying to touch her. In fact, the babies were using all the tricks that they had learned in the past few months while playing and being engaged in Motherese and other forms of communication – for example, 'talking', laughing and gesturing with mum.

Some babies began to cry, at which point mum was quite rightly unwilling to keep up her 'still face' and rushed to comfort her child. Details of a YouTube video clip, featuring excerpts from this experiment, and a short interview with Tronick, are given below. I find it quite distressing to watch, though baby comes to no harm.

What this shows us is that this interactive play has become emotionally important for both baby and parent, where mother and child are involved in a loving relationship, as well as providing baby with important early experience in conversation.

Parents vary

While some mothers are busy making plenty of embarrassing noises and talking in a ludicrous way, other mothers, and especially fathers, may be more reserved. Fathers are often less likely to engage their children in what they perceive as 'Baby Talk'. However, this does not mean that these parents are in some way restricting their child's communication. What is important is that a parent feels able to get involved in play and chat with their baby in a way that feels comfortable and natural – for the pleasure that it gives both of them.

I discussed the variation in parents' responses with Maggie Harris, specialist health visitor for Infant Mental Health with Barnet, Enfield and Haringey

Mental Health Trust. Maggie provides training for practitioners working with parents of young babies. Maggie prefers to use the term Parentese when describing how adults talk with infants, in recognition that fathers and all family members and carers are important players in early interaction.

Maggie explained the emotional power of using Parentese: '[It] involves a musicality that exposes the infant to a more positive emotional experience that is not so prominent when adults are talking to each other or to older children.'

Maggie agrees that the type of excited playful interaction we have described may not come naturally to some parents or carers, or that they may feel embarrassed to be heard to use 'baby talk'. 'In this event, encouraging parents to sing rhymes and show positive expression in their language may help to engage the infant in a similar way. Nevertheless, it is important for an infant to have some regular exposure to this kind of communication. It is nature's way of making sure that an infant feels important and has positive feelings about themselves – which is the foundation for self-esteem.'

Throughout her training courses, Maggie emphasises the importance of parents being able to 'tune into' their very young children. This attunement comes through early communication, and is vital for the infant's emotional and social development. As Maggie explains: 'This is because early patterns of relating are set around two years of age and form the blueprint for all future relationships. When parents speak to their child using a more high-pitched and exaggerated tone of voice, it is nature's way of helping them and their baby to "tune in" to each other. This is often described as a "dance of attunement" though,

as Michael points out, it is a “dance of conversation” too!’

When parents need support

Parents also vary in their cultural backgrounds, social circumstances, beliefs and knowledge about child development. Parents who involve their babies in play and using Parentese believe, often subconsciously, that their baby is active in communicating, and that this play and talk is important for their baby’s wellbeing and development.

Some parents, who have moved to the UK, may come from cultures where mother and father see their role primarily as providers of physical nurture. In my discussions with parents I often find that, ‘back home’, play and interaction with baby was provided by grandparents and other family members. In these cases, we need to support parents to be clear that their children’s emerging language and wellbeing depends on children being involved in affectionate interactions that take place throughout baby’s day.

Some parents’ beliefs, or lack of understanding of the importance of being responsive, may have led them to develop a style of talking that is highly directive. Here, the main form of talking to children is to give them instructions and to tell them not to do things.

In some extreme cases, children hear minimum language as babies and toddlers, perhaps because the mother suffers from ongoing depression or mental health issues. This can have a very detrimental impact on children’s later language development, and particularly their ability to interact with other people.

All of the drop-in sessions that I visit, for parents of babies and toddlers at children’s centres, are based on the understanding that it is important for parents to be responsive to their young children. A parent who is not responding to his or her baby’s sounds and emerging willingness to play may just be unaware of the need that the baby has for the company of a responsive adult.

Whatever the reason for the lack of interaction, staff at the drop-in will work hard to model interaction and to help the parents know how it feels to be successful in play. This process will almost

certainly involve plenty of Parentese and responding to the baby.

Varying responsiveness

My assumption so far has been that a baby has a drive to reach out to and connect with his carers, in order to build a relationship with them. However, we need to recognise that there will be circumstances in which babies are unable to do this early in their lives. This may be because of the need for intensive care, which can restrict the amount of interaction that parents and their baby can be involved in.

In other cases, the baby may have a developmental delay, such as Down syndrome, where early interaction is impeded because babies are either not giving off the signals that they want to be communicated with, or are not able to respond to their parent’s overtures. The parents may be keen to get involved with interaction and play, including using Parentese, but the baby may be unable to respond at that time (Slonims et al, 2006). In these cases parents may need support with building this early relationship, and to continue with these types of interactions when their child is able to respond.

Practitioners caring for young children should use Parentese as part of their interactions with young children – because a carer’s responsiveness contributes significantly to an infant’s emotional wellbeing, understanding of relationships and language development. The playful use of language is an indicator of a warm relationship of mutual enjoyment emerging between carer and child. The most skilled practitioners do this automatically, while less experienced staff can develop their interactions by tuning into babies and finding out what makes them laugh, smile and respond.

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Useful reading

- *Child’s Talk: Learning to Use Language* by Jerome Bruner. WW Norton (ISBN: 9780393953459).
- *Nurturing Natures: Attachment and Children’s Emotional, Sociocultural and Brain Development* by Graham Music. Psychology Press (ISBN: 9781848720572).
- *Your Baby Is Speaking to You: a visual guide to the amazing behaviors of your newborn and growing baby* by Kevin Nugent. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company (ISBN: 9780547242958).
- *What Mothers Do: especially when it looks like nothing* by Naomi Stadlen. Piatkus Books (ISBN: 9780749926205).
- Professor Edward Tronick and the ‘Still Face’ experiment can be watched on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>

References

Slonims V, Cox A, McConachie H (2006) Analysis of mother–infant interaction in infants with Down syndrome and typically developing infants; in *American Journal on Mental Retardation* 111 (4) pp 273–89

Key points

- Practitioners should use Parentese as part of their interactions with young children, because a carer’s responsiveness contributes significantly to an infant’s emotional wellbeing, understanding of relationships and language development.
- The playful use of language is an indicator of a warm relationship of mutual enjoyment emerging between carer and child
- The most skilled practitioners do this automatically, while less experienced staff can develop their interactions by tuning into babies and finding out what makes them laugh, smile and respond