

# Getting to first words

In the sixth article in our series on children's communication from birth to three, we explore the start of the first word stage, its link to physical development and the value of action songs and using signing.



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**I**N THIS article, we are going to look at two children – Isla and Kevin. Isla is 14-months-old, Kevin is 18-months-old, and both have attended the same day nursery since they were nine-months-old. Isla's parents both speak English, while Kevin's extended family were originally from Hong Kong, so Kevin is spoken to in Cantonese at home and is immersed in English, when in nursery.

Both children have a passion for singing songs – to themselves, with their parents and with anyone who knows the words and actions. Singing, for Kevin and Isla, is a whole-body experience, because in nursery they have learned a sequence of actions that go hand-in-hand (literally) with the words of the songs. Isla's number one is *Row, Row Your Boat*, complete with verses about dreaming, a crocodile, a polar bear and a lion.

Kevin enjoys that song too, but his big hit is *Sleeping Bunnies*. Kevin's grandmother once sang this song 15 times in a row with Kevin, including all the actions about 'sleeping until noon' and waking the bunnies 'with a merry tune'. Kevin has no idea what a bunny is, let alone noon or a merry tune, but this almost compulsive singing behaviour is a sign that both children have well and truly arrived at the first word stage in their language development.

## The story so far

Up to now, Isla and Kevin have been involved in countless thousands of interactions – with their parents, extended family and with practitioners in their day nursery. These interactions, which began with adults using 'parentese', have changed recently to involve more standard language. The adults are still using a great deal of words and phrases that are typically associated with talking with babies and toddlers – for example, 'Come to mummy/Isla got it?/Kevin, look at the doggie! Look at the woof woof. You say woof, woof, woof!', and so on.

However, everyone in the families has sensed that the children are now very keen to learn the names of objects, so adults, brothers and sisters have automatically begun to use every opportunity they can to involve the children in conversation that increases their vocabulary.

The children's involvement in so many interactions, from birth, has contributed towards them feeling confident in their social relationships. They have strong bonds with their parents that have

allowed them to form bonds with other caregivers. Because they have been talked with, played with and sung with since birth, both children have developed a powerful association between language and being loved and cared for. These social factors, coupled with the children's rapidly expanding intellectual and physical development, have brought Isla and Kevin to a point where they are not only beginning to notice individual words, but are driven to imitate and use them spontaneously.

The parents are emotionally 'tuned in' to their children, which means they have an awareness of how best to communicate with them. This includes responding to, and copying, the sounds they make. This is not something that the parents are consciously aware of, but they have developed a type of 'dance' with their children, where each understands the other and plays around with sounds. However, almost overnight the children introduced a new step in the dance – imitation.

Up to this point, the adults had been imitating the children's sounds and babbling, but suddenly the children have begun to imitate the adults. This led the parents to change the way they interacted with their children, as Isla and Kevin began to try and copy the sounds and body movements the adults were making.

This was combined with a change in the children's pointing behaviour. Significantly, instead of pointing because they wanted something, both children began to point at objects and say: 'Uh, uh!' The adults interpreted this as meaning, 'that's interesting, I want you to look at that, I know what it is, but please tell me what it is, because I want to hear you using the word'.

## Girls and boys

While both children are heading towards the same outcome – using single words – they are taking slightly different paths on their journey. It will come as no surprise to many that Isla, as a girl, will reach her destination ahead of Kevin.

What I am alluding to here is the observable differences between many children at this stage in their development as 'communicators'. I am not prepared to state emphatically that all boys differ from all girls in the way that they learn to use language, but from my experience and observation many boys have a different pattern of behaviours that lead them to develop their first words slightly later than girls.



Children as young as nine-months can use signs to indicate what they want – here, the sign for cheese is used

From my observation, the key factor that creates this difference is the link between physical development and communication. Let us look again at Kevin. Today, Kevin has taught himself how to climb on the dining room table. He has been building up to this feat for a few months now. First, he mastered how to stand up, then moved on to climbing on the sofa and, finally, is walking confidently indoors.

While he has been in the process of mastering these gross motor movements, he has been paying some attention to learning other skills – for example, how to use the remote control to switch the television on and off, how to feed himself and how to communicate non-verbally. Now that he is confident with walking and climbing, he is ready to take an interest in books and the children's programmes on the television. He has become fascinated by one programme in particular – *Something Special*.

Isla has also been compelled to develop her gross motor skills. However, unlike Kevin, she has focused on books, television programmes and developing her fine motor skills, at the same time. Rather than demanding to have the remote control so that she can turn the telly on and off, since 10-months-old, Isla has been pretending that the remote is her mother's mobile phone, babbling into it and having long 'conversations' with herself.

While Isla has a fascination for the same types of books and television programmes as Kevin, her intense focus started earlier. Isla was able to combine her drive

towards walking with the development of her fine motor and social skills, which allowed her to focus on language development and, therefore, she reached the first word stage earlier than Kevin.

As a result, Isla's parents and carers responded, quite naturally, by involving her in many more book-sharing sessions and less physical play. This is inevitable, and not a problem for either child, though Isla was more focused on language from an earlier age than Kevin.

I have met many children like Isla and Kevin, and while I am not prepared to state that boys and girls learn language differently, I would be delighted to engage in a discussion on this important area of child development. It is essential to explore individual and group differences, because many more boys than girls experience significant difficulties with learning how to talk, and we need to plan strategies to support these children.

### Singing is vital for early communication

Action songs provide a vital link between children's fixation with mastering gross motor skills and language development. It is no coincidence that Isla and Kevin love *Row Row Your Boat* and *Sleeping Bunnies*. Both involve gross motor movements that need to be coordinated with words. At this early stage it is not important that the words convey any meaning. What is crucial is that they link a word with an action – sleeping (lie down) and hop, hop,

hop (jump up). It helps to stop at the end of each action song, because this gives a chance for the children to focus on this phrase, respond to it and then signal that they would like another go.

These types of songs provide children with exactly the type of interaction they need at this stage, as well as giving both children and adults a huge amount of pleasure.

Isla's first true words, after mama and dada, were 'wuhwuh' and 'deh', meaning 'I want you to sing *Row Row Your Boat*' (wuhwuh), and 'do it again' (deh). We know that these were her first words because she consistently used the same combinations of sounds to convey the same meaning each time she was involved in a particular activity – singing action songs. The same was true for Kevin, who said 'deh' (again) and 'doh!' (stop).

### Using signs is important

Adults the world over involve children in action songs, and for me it is a logical step to involve children in using signs as we speak and sing. Many parents and practitioners sign with their hands as they speak – using mainly either Makaton, or selected signs from British Sign Language (BSL).

There are several advantages to using signs as part of spoken interaction with young children:

- Adults who use signing tend to slow down their speech and emphasise specific words, allowing children to focus on key words in a stream of sound.
- Signs are part of an agreed system and can be used consistently by all adults communicating with the child.
- Children as young as nine-months-old can use signs to indicate what they want, well before they are physically able to use identifiable spoken words.
- Combining spoken words with consistent actions allows children to attach meaning to what is being said.

One particular area of signing with young children that I am interested in exploring is its importance for children like Kevin, who are immersed in two different languages.

I suspect that talking, singing and signing are particularly beneficial for Kevin in his nursery. He

already understands many more Cantonese words and phrases than he can say, but the practitioners who care for him do not know Cantonese. This means that adults and children have to work hard to understand each other.

However, because the setting has adopted signing as they talk and sing in English, Kevin will find it easier to identify the key words in his second language. This will benefit his emotional development, because he is more able to understand his English-speaking carers, as well as being able to make himself understood.

Both Kevin and Isla are fanatical fans of the BBC CBeebies television programme *Something Special*. The programme's presenter, Justin Fletcher, who also appears as Mister Tumble, and his ever-expanding set of relatives, uses the Makaton sign system throughout each episode. The programme, along with associated weekly children's magazines and interactive website, has helped to make the concept of talking and signing a part of millions of children's everyday lives.

Both Kevin and Isla watch the programme regularly. It is colourful, repetitive, full of action and also appeals to adults. From nine-months-old Isla was transfixed, while Kevin came to enjoy it at around 14-months-old, once he had developed his gross motor skills as far as he could at this stage.

### The significance for practitioners

To maximise the impact of action songs and signing, I always recommend that settings involve parents in singing and signing sessions – making sure that all parents know the words and actions of the songs that their children love. If adults use signs consistently and regularly as they talk and sing, children's understanding increases, as does their use of signs and single words.

Action songs and signing have an important role to play in supporting older children with speech and language delay, who are often very active. This might be because they recognise that communication is difficult and, therefore, naturally focus on what they feel more comfortable with, such as physical development.

By using singing and signing we can capture their energy and make language meaningful. This helps them to focus their listening skills, as well as making group singing sessions more enjoyable, thus increasing their involvement with language. **eye**

### Useful resources

- For more information about signing, visit – [www.signingbabies.co.uk](http://www.signingbabies.co.uk)
- The Something Special website – [www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/something-special/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/something-special/)
- To take part in an interactive discussion about early language development and gender, visit – [www.talk4meaning.co.uk](http://www.talk4meaning.co.uk)

## Key points

- The start of the first word stage of communication is developmentally linked to physical development
- Using action songs is perfect in helping children incorporate their movement and pointing skills into their early word development
- Signing also plays an important role in the development of the early word stage
- Singing and signing can help make language more meaningful and more fun, while also developing other communication skills, such as listening