

Time to chat

Confidence may follow from practitioners giving special attention to the children in a setting who rarely speak up for themselves. *Michael Jones* explains one approach

Perhaps our most important aim for young children in early years settings is that they develop confidence: as learners, and in the ways they relate to other people. We particularly hope that children will become confident talkers. Children develop confidence in speaking by experiencing enjoyable interactions with adults and other children. Or to put it more simply, by having lots of good chats!

However, one of the biggest challenges for adults in early years settings is how to involve quiet children in meaningful and prolonged chats, particularly when other children are competing for our attention. Describing the problem, one experienced practitioner said, 'There are a few quiet little dots here, who need just as much of my attention as the other children. But how can you give them what they need when you are trying to have four conversations at once?'

Lola is one such 'quiet little dot'. Like a lot of children who are quiet in settings, she does as she is told, but doesn't have confidence to assert herself by asking questions, or saying what she would or wouldn't like to do. She avoids adults, or tries not to draw attention to herself. She tends to stick to one activity for most of the session, possibly because she is unsure about trying new activities. Lola has a solemn expression on her face for most of the time in the setting, showing neither happiness, sadness nor excitement. She says very little spontaneously to adults, and particularly when other children are around. She does not contribute to big groups.

These are all signs that she is lacking in confidence. While she does not show any outward signs of distress, it is likely that she finds the setting quite overwhelming.

Yet Lola is completely different at home. When I spoke with her mother she was baffled. 'It doesn't make sense,' she said. 'Lola and her sister

talk and make a noise non-stop!' Perhaps the reason for this contrast lies in the difference between talk at home and talk in a busy setting. At home, children tend to be in charge of what they talk about. They start conversations, and talk about what they know about. The adults understand what they are talking about, and chat is relaxed, easy, and enjoyable for everyone.

In a busy setting, however, adults often have much less time to chat. They can start a conversation with one child and find that immediately two other children join in, or talk about something completely different. Or, the adult needs to move away to another part of the room to deal with a pressing problem. Quiet children, faced with this reaction, often walk away and play on their own.

While these types of reactions are quite common in young children, particularly when they are new to a setting, most children naturally progress to being able to talk freely with children and adults. First and foremost, they learn to use talk to attract and maintain an adult's attention, and possibly to share that attention with other children. They become quick to respond to questions, and to ask questions of their own. They progress from using these skills individually with adults, then in small groups, and hopefully then contribute in large groups. These are essential skills, and children will need them if they are to achieve well in school. It is essential that adults see developing confident speaking as a priority for all children.

ADULT SUPPORT

Children who are very quiet in the setting are often confident talkers at home and, like all children, quiet children are most confident talking about what they know most about, namely their family and family life.

To support quiet children, we should start by sharing our concerns

with the child's parents and strengthening links with home. We could start by saying, for example, 'We want to make sure that all children get the most out of being with us. We've noticed that Lola is very quiet here. Is there anything we can do together to help her become more confident?'

It will be particularly helpful to find out about Lola's favourite toys, activities, books and TV programmes, and information about close family members or pets. Children usually have lots to say about what they like to watch on television, and the setting could buy some soft toys and posters



As she gained in confidence with the one-to-one attention,

based on children's TV characters, so that all children, including Lola, can talk about them.

THE BABY EXPERIENCE

But what about in the setting? I have been working in settings involved in Bedford's Every Child a Talker (ECAT) project to see how we can draw in and maintain conversation with groups of quiet children, while at the same time involving those who are already confident speakers. We are devising activities that will stimulate chat about their interests. Popular subjects include toys, pets, TV programmes, grandparents, clothes, shopping, bathtime, babies, cars and trains, and holidays.

Staff at Bunyan Playgroup in Kempston, near Bedford, took part in a successful activity that I call 'the Baby Experience'. Before the children arrived we spread out a large colourful quilt on the floor near the entrance, so everyone could see it when they came in. On the quilt we put four realistic-looking baby dolls, and all the 'real baby equipment' needed to care for them during the morning: clothes,

nappies, wipes, baby lotion, baby milk and food, baby bottles, bowls and spoons, dummies, toys, teething rings, a baby bath and bath equipment. We planned to have enough equipment for only three babies, as this encourages children to develop the crucial skills of co-operation and turn-taking.

Most importantly, we planned for two adults to be involved solely with the activity. We imagined it would last an hour, but we were still going strong after an hour and a half! Julie Parsons, early language lead practitioner for Bunyan's ECAT project, was my support.

We decided that I would lead and supervise the activity, while Julie would be exclusively available to give attention and encouragement to the quieter children. When the parents and children arrived, most parents commented on how inviting it looked, and asked their children if they would like to get involved.

As there were only four babies, we limited the number of children who could care for them. We encouraged two confident and two less confident



Lola began to laugh spontaneously and chatter with the other children



For more information about ECAT visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk

children to join in first. There was no problem in getting children involved in role-playing changing, feeding and bathing the babies. But the challenge was ensuring that the more verbal children did not take over.

We needed to be very clear with all of the confident children about sharing the babies and equipment, as they tended to assume that they could just take what they wanted from the quieter children. Almost as soon as the more confident children joined in, the quiet children began to move away.

However, Julie was very encouraging, using responses such as holding Lola's hand and saying to Dale, who was interrupting, 'That's interesting, but I'm talking to Lola right now. Aren't I, Lola? Lola is telling me something very interesting, aren't you Lola? Can I tell the other children? Did you know that Lola's baby has got wind? Now you tell Michael what you want, because it's Lola's turn to talk and play with me.'

I then talked with Dale, and with the children who were queuing up to join in.

VALUED CONTRIBUTION

By using these types of responses, the quiet children could see that they were being given space and time to talk and play with little interruption and that their contributions were as valuable as that of any other child. Because babies were a big interest, Julie was able to engage the quieter children in chat about many topics, including home and family. As a result, the children focused for longer and said more in this session than usual. And to be fair to the other children who wanted a go, we made plans to repeat the activity.

As it was a hot day, and we were splashing water all over the quilt, we moved the baby bathing activity outside, to be supervised by Julie. It was hugely gratifying to see Lola laughing loudly and talking spontaneously with other children. At story time at the end of the session, we talked about the babies with all of the children, shared a baby story and sang songs. I was able to involve Lola in a simple way by saying, 'We've been looking after these babies this morning, and Lola and some other children having been helping, haven't you Lola?' Lola nodded her head and smiled. ■

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