

# One to one

Parents play a crucial role in helping children learn to communicate – but there is not a one-size-fits-all approach, says *Penny Tassoni*

**W**hile many children are doing well with their language and so begin Reception with fluent speech and language, there is a concern about the rising number of children who are not fluent at four years old. As a result, there has been a focus on children's speech and language in the past few years.

In England, projects such as Every Child A Talker have been rolled out, while locally many speech and language teams have developed their own resources.

The reason for the focus is easy to understand – the level of children's language can impact on their life chances.

Fluent language is linked to reading and writing and so any delay can make it hard for children to learn. It is also linked to healthy emotional and social development and so building friendships and controlling emotions becomes harder with delayed language.

While early years settings can undoubtedly support children's language, parents have the trump hand. This is because parents share a unique emotional bond with their children, which can act as catalyst to motivate communication.

## SIMPLE AND NATURAL

Sadly, some parents do not realise that the time they spend chatting to their children matters. They can assume that the 'real education' takes place while their child is with early years practitioners. After all, practitioners follow a curriculum, carry out assessments and write reports. Practitioners talk about 'next steps', inspections and transitions.

By contrast, walking to the local shop and talking about nanny might seem – from a parent's perspective – too simple and natural for it to really count for anything. The reality, of course, is something very different.

We know that time matters when it comes to communication. Long interactions are better than short ones. One-to-one interactions with a sensitive adult are extraordinarily precious and can have a huge impact on children. So while parents may think nothing of that trip to the shop or the chat about what to have for tea, those uninterrupted individual interactions are hard for group care settings to replicate day in and day out.

Many parents do not realise this and perhaps a good starting point is to let them know that there are limits to how much one-to-one interaction can be provided at the setting. Their input is not just 'nice'; it's essential.

## ENJOYMENT

Although we as practitioners need to take communication and language seriously, parents should focus on having fun with their children. This is because when interactions are mutually enjoyable, the adult becomes fully engaged and their communication style improves. You only have to watch a dad lift their baby up in the air to see great eye contact, a wide smile and a tenuous chuckle.

**Some parents do not realise that the time they spend chatting to their children matters**

If we keep watching, we will also see how the baby responds and how together the father and child start to mirror each other. So when it comes to suggesting activities for parents to carry out at home, it is important to give permission for parents to focus on those activities that they are likely to enjoy.

Interestingly, for some parents, this will not be play. There are some parents who find playing with young children the antithesis of pleasure. They can look and feel bored sitting on the floor pretending to drink cups of tea or being asked to help build a castle. The temptation to send a quick text or check out the action on Facebook quickly becomes overwhelming.

Yet those same parents can transform into expert communicators in other situations, such as taking the dog for a walk or making cakes.

So it can be worth having an honest conversation with parents about what things that they have tried out with their child and what they most enjoy doing.

Finally, perhaps we also need to consider looking at ourselves in this respect. Practitioners are likely to have different preferences when it comes to communicating and playing with children.

In group care settings, there will always be those who find the role-play area an easy place to enjoy the company of children, while others might love to engage with children in the garden or on a walk.

As professionals we can probably turn our hand to a range of situations, but it is always worth playing to our communication strengths. ■



MAIN PHOTO: MELVILLE STREET NURSERY, EDINBURGH; DOUGLAS ROBERTSON

# Talking: out and about

Going out of the home can really help boost your child's language. New experiences provide opportunities to see new objects and people and these all need labelling.

As a parent, you may also find that going out has plenty of other benefits, too. Fresh air, for example, will help your child sleep better while the stimulation gained from seeing new things will keep your child from becoming bored and potentially more demanding.

## **OFF TO THE LIBRARY**

### **From six months**

Babies love books. If you have not been to your local library, it is worth paying a visit. The old days of the musty, silent library are long gone. They are now child-friendly areas where you can meet other parents and your baby can socialise.

Use picture books and spend a moment pointing to the images and making comments about what you see. Expect your baby to take time to respond to new images.

#### *How this activity helps your child*

**Literacy:** Early introduction to books will help your baby learn to enjoy them.

**Socialisation:** Going to new places where babies can see other children and adults is a great way to help them learn to be with others.

**Language development:** Sharing books with babies has been shown to develop their vocabulary and communication skills

#### *What next?*

Find out if there are any rhyme or story sessions held at your library that you can join.



## **FEED THE DUCKS**

### **From 15 months**

Children love animals, and if you have a park with a pond nearby you might like to take your child to feed the ducks one day. Spend a little time talking about what the ducks are doing or, if you cannot see them, consider where they might be hiding.

Take time as well to get down to your child's height and see what they are seeing.

Don't worry if your child prefers to eat the bread rather than give it to the birds. This is pretty typical for this age.



#### *How this activity helps your child*

**Movement:** This activity helps your child to use their arms as they throw or drop the pieces of bread.

**Perception:** Watching the ducks as they move can help children's visual skills as they have to track the moving objects.

**Mathematics:** This activity lends itself to some early mathematics. Try counting the ducks or pointing out a duck that is significantly smaller or larger than the others.

#### *What next?*

Teach your child the nursery rhyme Five Little Ducks Went Swimming One Day.

## **SWIMMING POOL**

### **From two years**

In some areas, it is possible to take children to the swimming pool for free or at a reduced rate. As most children love playing with water, this is a trip that is worth considering, especially if you are able to share the visit with a friend and their children.

There are plenty of possibilities for talking, from naming items such as airbands through to speaking about splashing and kicking while your child is in the water.

*How this activity helps your child*

**Physical development:** Playing in the water and attempting to swim is good for the development of your child's muscles and co-ordination.

**Emotional development:** Being in water seems to help children to relax as well as develop confidence in their own abilities.

**Early science:** There are a lot of opportunities for your child to learn about the properties of water.

*What next?*

See if there are any classes that you can attend with your child.

### BALL GAMES

#### From two-and-a-half years

Games involving balls are great to play in the garden or park. To begin, choose a medium-sized light, soft ball. Don't worry about teaching your child as most children learn to use balls by watching others and practising for themselves. Try a range of activities including kicking and throwing and catching.

*How this activity helps your child*

**Language:** Your child can learn words linked to distance such as 'far' and 'near'.

**Balance and co-ordination:**

Playing outdoors with a ball improves co-ordination and balance.

**Social development:** Taking turns to kick or throw a ball helps children to learn to play with others.

*What next?*

Put out some simple targets for your child to aim to hit, such as a half-filled bottle of water.

### ON THE BUSES

#### From three years

If you normally use a car, think about taking a bus or even a train for a change. While it may seem a simple activity, it is a great experience for a child.

It doesn't really matter where you go; climbing onto a bus – especially a double decker one – can seem like an adventure for a child. Let your child choose their seat, look out of the window and press the bell when it is time to get off.

*How this activity helps your child*

**Language:** Your child can learn new words linked to buses or trains, such as 'stop', 'fare' and 'request'.

**Social development:** Using public transport can help children to learn how to adapt their behaviour in a range of different situations.

**Mathematics:** Count the stops before you need to get off.

*What next?*

Sing the nursery rhyme The Wheels on the Bus and see if your child can join in with the words.

### OFF TO THE SHOPS

#### From four years

Walking to the local shop can be a good way for children to develop

a range of skills. Talk about what you need to buy on your way there and why it is needed. Once you arrive at the shop, see if your child can find the item by following your instructions – for example, 'It's a red packet, on the second shelf'.

Where there is one or more similar items, you might talk to children about the reasons you prefer a certain product; it may be due to cost, taste or something else.

*How this activity helps your child*

**Confidence:** Going to the shop and finding products can help children's confidence as they learn to follow instructions.

**Mathematics:** Shopping is a great way for children to learn about numbers. Point out prices and consider letting your child pass the money across the till.

**Literacy:** Looking at labels on products can help children become more aware of the printed word, and you may find that after a while your child can recognise some words.

*What next?*

See if your child can help you draw up a simple shopping list. Don't worry about spelling or letter formation. Just let them enjoy the experience.

