

Full attention

Dr Cath Arnold reviews *How Toddlers Learn the Secret Language of Movies* by Cary Bazalgette and discovers why movie-watching is much more than a passive experience

Based on a PhD study by a media education specialist, this book blew my mind. I think that, in future, it is likely to become a seminal text.

Cary's attitude to the children and media is extremely refreshing. She challenges the idea that movie-watching is 'passive'. She studied her twin grandchildren's use of media from 22 to 42 months. They are Connie and Alfie, and Cary refers to observations of each child throughout the book. She suggests that the children 'focus intently' rather than being 'passive'. Viewing commonly referred to as 'obsessive' she reframes as 'studying and working out what is happening'.

She asks whether we 'could envisage an equivalence between movies and written language' in the knowledge that children's expertise about movies is almost ignored in educational settings or used as a tool to assist the learning of literacy. She states that seeing toddlers' viewing as 'learning related' is respectful and, after reading this book, I totally agree. Like Professor Laevers, Cary sees 'focused attention' when learning is taking place and she gives detailed descriptions of the children's body language.

Cary draws on all of the available research on young children and media, which is rather sparse and/or not often carried out in naturalistic situations. She uses her knowledge of 'embodied cognition' and 'mirror neurons' to understand what is happening when the children are viewing movies. Helpfully, Cary uses the idea of 'salience' (what stands out as important to the children) to understand the responses of the children to certain films or programmes.

Real or pretend?

I found Chapter 6, on 'Fear, Distress and Sadness', particularly



enlightening. The idea that when children are fearful or distressed during a movie or programme, as parents/carers, it is more helpful to continue watching until the issue is resolved, would, I think, help parents and children. Cary argues that 'acknowledging the fear' and following through to resolution is much more helpful.

Towards the end of her study, Cary tried to establish whether Connie and Alfie thought what was on screen was real or pretend. There are some lovely conversations between each child and their mother and grandmother. She also interviewed both parents to gain a deeper understanding of the children's learning and knowledge of movies. Cary noticed when the children were 'anticipating' an outcome, often after repeated viewing.

Cary devotes a whole chapter to 'narrative', making links between pretend play, stories and movies, using her deep knowledge of media

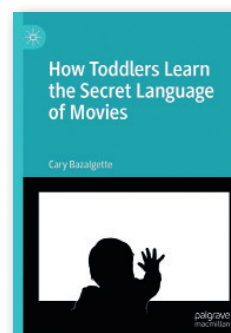
The book reveals the value of watching films for children

and the different components involved in film-making. The children's mother noticed when, after repeated viewing, the two children no longer wanted to watch a particular movie or programme and she came up with the idea that they had 'used it up', which could apply to other learning. Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' is based on the concept that children need challenge and to tackle things that are currently slightly beyond their understanding. Another important point made, 'narrative understanding begins well before verbal fluency, and that movie-viewing may play a key role in helping to develop this'.

Chapter 9 is entitled 'Viewing Together', in which Cary unpicks what might be the different viewing experiences children have within families. She draws on Colwyn Trevarthen's research and states that movie-viewing is a 'cultural practice' and that children naturally want to become part of their culture. 'Sounds' within the room from co-viewers, as well as from the film being watched, can affect or enhance children's understanding.

Very young children are 'learning how movies work' and 'mastering the codes and conventions of movies' without most adults (including myself) realising the value (up to now).

The book is currently available online to academics, but only as an expensive hardback to general audiences. I hope that Palgrave Macmillan soon realises that a cheaper paperback edition would be snapped up by parents, teachers and early years professionals. ■



How Toddlers Learn the Secret Language of Movies by Cary Bazalgette is published by Palgrave MacMillan and is available as a hardback and an e-book: <https://bit.ly/3XbGd1l>