

Talking with Babies and Toddlers

By Jan Faulkner

The importance of talking with babies and toddlers

Forming relationships with babies and toddlers is one of the most important roles that a carer will undertake. Placing a high value on relationships helps children to feel a connectedness and a sense of place within the service. Integral to establishing and maintaining relationships is for the carer to engage in conversations and talk with the children. This is because, firstly, positive interactions help carers to establish trust with children. Secondly, supporting children's development of language and communication skills helps them to be able to express their ideas and convey their feelings.

When talking with children, it is important that the conversation arises from a genuine interest. In other words carers must want to be with children, talk with children and find out about what they are thinking. Displaying a genuine interest and enjoyment in spending time with children also shows that you value and respect them.

For conversations to be genuine, it is also important to "see" the child as a social being - someone who wants to engage in interactions with others. Carers must be convinced of the potential and desire of babies and toddlers to build relationships, communicate with others and construct knowledge socially. In doing so adults must recognise and support the range of languages that children use to communicate. With babies and toddlers these languages can include gestures, facial expressions, body movements, sounds, cries, touch, eye contact and games. Recognising and seeing these attributes will help carers to respond and talk with children in meaningful ways.

What strategies can be used to help make conversations meaningful?

Linke and Fleeer (2002) suggest that "parents and other carers have the opportunity to help shape the way infants make sense of their world and the opportunity to provide surroundings and care that enable the infants to make the most of their development and learning capabilities." The type of surroundings and care that are provided play an important role in supporting meaningful relationships and interactions between carers and children. The following are some of the strategies that can help carers to provide such an environment.

This article relates to:

FDCQA: Principles 1.1, 1.2, 1.3

QIAS: Quality Area 1 and 4

Principles 2.1, 2.3, 6.4, 6.5, 7.2, 7.3

Find meaningful opportunities to interact with babies and toddlers

Caring tasks such as nappy changing and mealtimes can be used as a time for one to one interactions. These tasks provide an opportunity to develop rituals and special ways of communicating. For example during nappy change it is important to talk in respectful ways about what is happening and to also develop rituals that may be special to the carer and the child.

Infants and toddlers like to play games and often have particular ones that they engage in repeatedly. These games always involve turn taking and require the adult to respond at the appropriate times. It is important to allow the child control over the game so that they can take the lead and decide when they want it to end. Engaging enthusiastically and responsively in these games shows the child that the carer has been listening to them and sees them as a valued social partner.

Organise space so that it invites interactions and supports relationships.

The way in which space is organised communicates something about the types of relationships and experiences that are valued in that environment. A space can invite interactions and support relationships if:

- Children are able to find something of themselves in the environment. For example, photographs of important people in children's lives can lead to discussions that help them to know that others value those relationships. Personal items from home can also help children to make the connection between home and the service.
- Documentation of children's experiences in the service is used to initiate discussions about what children have been doing. Even very young children will connect with photographic documentation of themselves and of others that they spend time with.



- The materials and objects within it are chosen and arranged so that they provide a stimulus for discussion and interaction. For example, an interesting object will attract attention, invite investigation and conversation.

Listen to children and observe their non-verbal communication.

Closely observing infants and toddlers will help adults to become in tune with the individual ways in which they communicate. Responding to their cues helps them to understand that they are an active and valued partner in communication. These cues can be a facial expression, a sound, a gaze, a gesture or the passing of an object. In responding the carer can:

- Support and hold the attention of the child in order to maintain a conversation. This requires the adult to have eye contact and to use facial and body expressions that are appropriate to the situation.
- Make explicit the meaning of a child's discovery by responding in words or repeating their sounds or movements.

- Comment on what is happening to support children's curiosity, perceptions and emotions.
- Continue and persist with the games that children initiate and enjoy.

Involve families and their thoughts.

The language that a child is accustomed to hearing is an important part of the environment. Finding out the simple words used with babies and toddlers at home will help to bridge the transition between home and care. From families, carers can learn a child's signals – their cries, facial expressions, the games they like to play. Personal contact between families and carers is the first step to building relationships and mutual trust.

What is valuable about documenting conversations?

Documenting some of the conversations and interactions that take place in the service can help carers to learn about the children and to learn about themselves. This documentation can be a valuable tool for reflecting on practice and for seeing situations in different ways. In doing so it can:

- Help carers to learn about the role that children play in interactions. For example the documentation can make evident the cues that children are using, the ways in which they may take the lead in conversations, the ways in which they may be influenced by the environment.
- Help carers to reflect on their own part in conversations such as the way in which they respond to children's cues.
- Allow carers and children to remember and reflect back on experiences. Using video, photographs or writing the story in descriptive ways can provide very graphic reminders of what took place.
- Become a way of sharing experiences with families.

Documentation is a way of valuing and making unique each child's experiences and contribution to the child care service. It can help carers to make meaning of the relationships and interactions that they have with children. When used in this way it is a tool that can help carers better understand themselves, the children and the ways in which they work with them. ■

Further reading and references

- Campbell, J. (2005). *Everyday Learning About Talking*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.
- Fler, M. and Linke, P. (2002). *Babies: good beginnings last forever*. *ECA Research in Practice Series*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.
- Gandini, L. and Pope Edwards, C. (eds) (2001). *Bambini: The Italian approach to infant/toddler care*. New York: Teachers College Press.