

# Talk to me! Communicating with babies

by Dr Anne Kennedy

Adults often talk 'about' or 'at' babies rather than talking with them. In a busy child care environment, where there are often many babies to care for, educators might be so focused on making sure they're meeting children's physical needs that they forget the importance of communicating with babies every day.

Educators may feel self-conscious talking to babies because they believe that babies are not developmentally 'ready' for language experiences or conversations. Observational and research evidence however shows that babies are able to express their feelings, interests and needs from birth using verbal and non-verbal communication such as smiling, vocalising, crying, or shaking their heads. Communication, as the Early Years Learning Framework states, 'is crucial to belonging' for all children. This means educators are expected to think about and plan for embedding communication experiences with babies into their programs (EYLF, 2009, p.38).

When educators tune in and respond to babies' capacity for communication they will find them fascinating conversation partners. The more educators show their interest in, and enjoyment of, babies' communication efforts, the more babies will attempt to engage in this behaviour (Parker-Rees, 2007). Communicating with babies during a game of 'peek-a-boo', for example, confirms that they are social beings who reward our attention and interest in them by communicating their obvious pleasure as they smile, laugh and play the game with us.

## Communicating with babies

The following strategies can assist educators to effectively communicate with babies:



### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.1, 3.1, 3.1-3.2, 3.6, 4.2, 4.4 and 4.5

**QIAS Principles** 1.1, 1.3-1.5, 2.1, 4.3, 4.5, 6.1, 6.4 and 6.5

- Talk with families about how their baby communicates with them at home to help you understand each baby's communication style. Share your communication strategies, responses from babies and outcomes with families.
- Support babies who are learning English as a second language by practices such as using key words in a baby's home language, playing songs or lullabies recorded in home languages, encouraging parents to interact or communicate with their baby using their home language.
- Keep noise levels down in the room so that babies are able to hear human voices and other sounds in their environment. Tune babies into these sounds by pointing out the features of sounds, repeating the sounds, modelling listening and asking questions such as "Peter, can you hear Mandy's voice? I think she is coming into our room".
- Allow time for daily interactions or conversations with each baby. Routine experiences such as nappy changing and meal times provide an excellent time and context for immersing babies in language.
- Focus on babies' enjoyment of and immersion in language by being creative and playful with language through the use of rhymes, poetry, songs and imaginative story-telling woven naturally into the program. Encourage babies' vocalisations, imitations and sound experimentation. Babies don't need language lessons!
- Tune into each baby's feelings, stress levels or cues, and respond to these with words of reassurance and recognition, as well as actions. For example, "I know that you want that teddy Bree, but Sam has that one. Look Bree! Here is another teddy for you".
- Observe and listen carefully to each baby's unique ways of communicating. Show babies that you understand the purpose of

their communication efforts. For example, “Pia, I can see by your big smile that you want us to sing that song again!”

- Combine actions or simple signs with words especially for babies with communication, visual or hearing impairments. For example, help a baby with visual impairment to touch the cot as you say, “Here is your cot Toby. It’s time to sleep in your cot”.
- Share sturdy books with simple illustrations or photographs. Follow the baby’s lead as you ‘read’ the story. One child might want you to talk about every page and another might want to point to things which you can name or describe with words.

## Conclusion

Positive, inclusive communication with babies provides an important foundation for the development of attachment, belonging and nurturing relationships between adults and babies. Conversations convey to babies that they are respected and valued as individuals. Talking respectfully to babies about what is occurring around them and with them also supports the development of their early language and cognitive skills ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

### An example of the educator’s role when communicating with babies

Nina, an educator, gently picks up eight month old, Jai, from his cot and smiles at him.

In Scenario A, Nina warmly says, “Hello Jai, did you have a good sleep? I think you did as you are the last baby to wake up!” She holds Jai, looking at him as she waits for his response to her conversation. Jai looks at Nina, smiles sleepily and says, “baa baa” as he points to a bookcase. Nina looks to where he is pointing and says, “Yes Jai, we can pick up Baa the lamb too. He’s been waiting for you to wake up”. Nina picks up the toy and gives it to Jai to hold. As they walk towards the nappy change area Jai says, “baa baa baa”. Nina starts singing *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* which is Jai’s favourite nursery rhyme.

In Scenario B, Nina says, “Time to get up”. As she starts to walk away from the cot with Jai, he smiles at her and says, “baa baa” and points to the bookcase. Nina keeps walking from the sleep room as she says to Jai, “We’ll get your lamb after I have changed your nappy”. Jai squirms and continues saying “baa baa baa”, all the way to the change table.

The above scenarios highlight two different ways educators might communicate with a baby during a routine experience. Scenario A shows a respectful and skilled educator using an everyday event to support Jai’s learning and development through his interests, interactions and conversations. The same educator in Scenario B acts respectfully but doesn’t utilise the natural or spontaneous learning opportunities that are present during this routine experience.

The other key features in Scenario A include the educator’s ability to:

- Use Jai’s name respectfully, speaking warmly and making eye contact which help to reinforce his sense of identity, wellbeing and self-esteem.
- Model language skills such as asking a question with appropriate raised inflection. Using a ‘normal’ tone with babies is recommended, but sometimes it can be helpful to emphasise a word to help babies tune into specific words such as when Nina emphasises the word ‘you’.
- Talk to Jai as if he understands everything she says, which reflects having high expectations for every child inclusive of all age groups and abilities (EYLF, 2009, p.12).
- Allow time for Jai to respond to her conversation which encourages him to take turns in the conversation by contributing about wanting his toy lamb.
- Demonstrate responsive listening by understanding Jai’s meaning when he points and says, “baa, baa”. This helps Jai to see himself as a capable communicator, as well as supporting his understanding that communication has a purpose.
- Show enthusiasm and enjoyment of Jai’s communication efforts as she spontaneously starts singing a relevant and favourite nursery rhyme.