

# Sharing attention

We know that babies need lots of attention, and making sure that they get this attention is an essential part of effective parenting and daycare provision. But how can babies get the early interaction that they need when there are other brothers and sisters to care for, or they are in a baby room with other children?

As soon as a baby is born, he is on a mission to make sense of his surroundings, and particularly to understand other people. This begins immediately the baby is able to fix his gaze into his mother's eyes. Later, baby looks at bright lights and moving objects, but his mother's face - and later those of other carers - provides the most fascination. This does not happen by chance, but is the start of the intense process of mother and baby building their relationship and learning how to understand each other. According to Sue Gerhardt, author of *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*, this process of 'attunement' takes place when a mother is 'tuned in and emotionally available to the child'. Tuning in includes chatting and playing and having fun with baby, using the particular type of exaggerated tone of voice and nonsense originally known as *Motherese*, though now referred to as *Parentese*, in recognition that fathers and other carers can also take part.

When parents talk and play with their young baby, as part of early interaction, they are giving baby important lessons in communication. This includes recognising essential information from adults' exaggerated, non-verbal signals, and particularly linking the adults' facial expressions with their tone of voice. Babies also learn to take turns in play, by typically making vocal sounds and parents responding. This helps babies to learn to share attention and feel that communication is fun and emotionally rewarding. Sharing attention regularly with an adult in this intense way also helps the child understand that when the session has finished there is no need to panic, as parents will be available to share attention through play at other times. These elaborate playful interactions continue as children move through the babbling stage, and later become conversation when children develop their first words and sentences. However, before this can happen, children need to be involved in many thousands of interactions.

## In practice

Having set out what babies need in order to develop emotionally, socially and as happy communicators, we need to look at how this can be achieved within the real world of

For parents and daycare practitioners alike, finding time to 'tune in' to babies and share meaningful interactions can be a challenge. **Michael Jones** explores the problems and offers solutions...

