

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?

Just because a baby can't talk, that doesn't mean she's incapable of holding a conversation, suggests **Ann Clare...**



I recently sat in a baby room conducting an Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) audit and as I was assessing the quality of the displays I was struck by the stillness around me. Looking up, I watched as an adult naturally interacted with a four month-old baby. This was a two-way conversation – but there were no words. The carer and the infant were locked into each other; each one's eyes focused in on the other's as in turn they used facial expression to converse. This was an activity in which both were involved. What I found fascinating in this observation was the skill with which the adult waited for the baby to respond, giving the child the message that she was important and that her contribution was valued.

Unfortunately, I have to say that such observations in baby rooms are a rarity. This is not to infer that the practitioners do not care for the infants in their charge, but rather to suggest that many EYFS professionals do not recognise the vital role that they play in the language development of babies and young children.

What I do see and hear are conversations, not

with babies but about them. The talk that takes place is all centred around caring; vital for infants' and young children's emotional wellbeing, but not the only type of discussion that is important. Loving conversations ensure that these very young children are safe and secure, but they do not necessarily recognise them as being valued in their own right as individuals. Babies need to have their voices heard if they are to gain in self-confidence, have their self-esteem raised, and begin to place themselves in the world.

More than words

The revised Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) clearly identifies the importance of communication and language in the first two years of a child's life; placing it as one of the three prime areas of learning and development, which "reflect the key skills and capacities all children need to develop and learn effectively", and "are particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive". If babies are not given models of language and communication from birth then they are being disadvantaged in all other areas of their learning and development.

I want practitioners to move away from the idea that because babies and young children 'don't have words' they cannot talk and therefore there is no need to engage them in conversation. The work of Murray and Andrews (2000) clearly demonstrates that from birth babies can communicate with others and that it is a natural drive for them to do so. The research shows how infants engage with faces from their very earliest moments: "One of the most dramatic abilities of the new-born that shows she is ready for social contact is her ability to imitate another person's facial expression." It also explores the 'still face' approach, which when adopted by the mother has an immediate effect on the baby, who can become distressed within seconds.

Having recognised why communication is important for development and what quality interaction looks like, we now need to consider how to ensure this happens within our settings. Frequently, adults go into interrogation or naming mode, bombarding young children with questions

Further reading:

Carr, M & Lee, W
Learning Stories – Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education (Sage, 2012)
Murray, L & Andrews, L
The Social Baby – Understanding Babies' communication from Birth (CP Publishing, 2000)
Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012)
tinyurl.com/tneyfs



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and words that are not relevant to their lives; a succession of queries to which carers already know the answer, asked without waiting for a response. As adults we all feel an urge to fill the silence and when others are present in the room, tend to be aware of the need to be 'seen' to be talking and interacting with the children. However,

in keeping with advice from speech and language therapists, all adults need to leave spaces for children to respond before jumping in with the answer. Practitioners should think about the silence in their rooms. Does it need to be filled with background nursery rhyme music? Must it be dominated with the voices of the adults? Does the 'conversation' always have to be questioning and naming? Cannot these be times for 'chat', the conversation of normal life that is relevant to the baby? This is reminiscent of the conversations that we all see within our lives, when mothers or fathers are chatting to their offspring as they walk round the shops, talking about what they are buying.

Face time

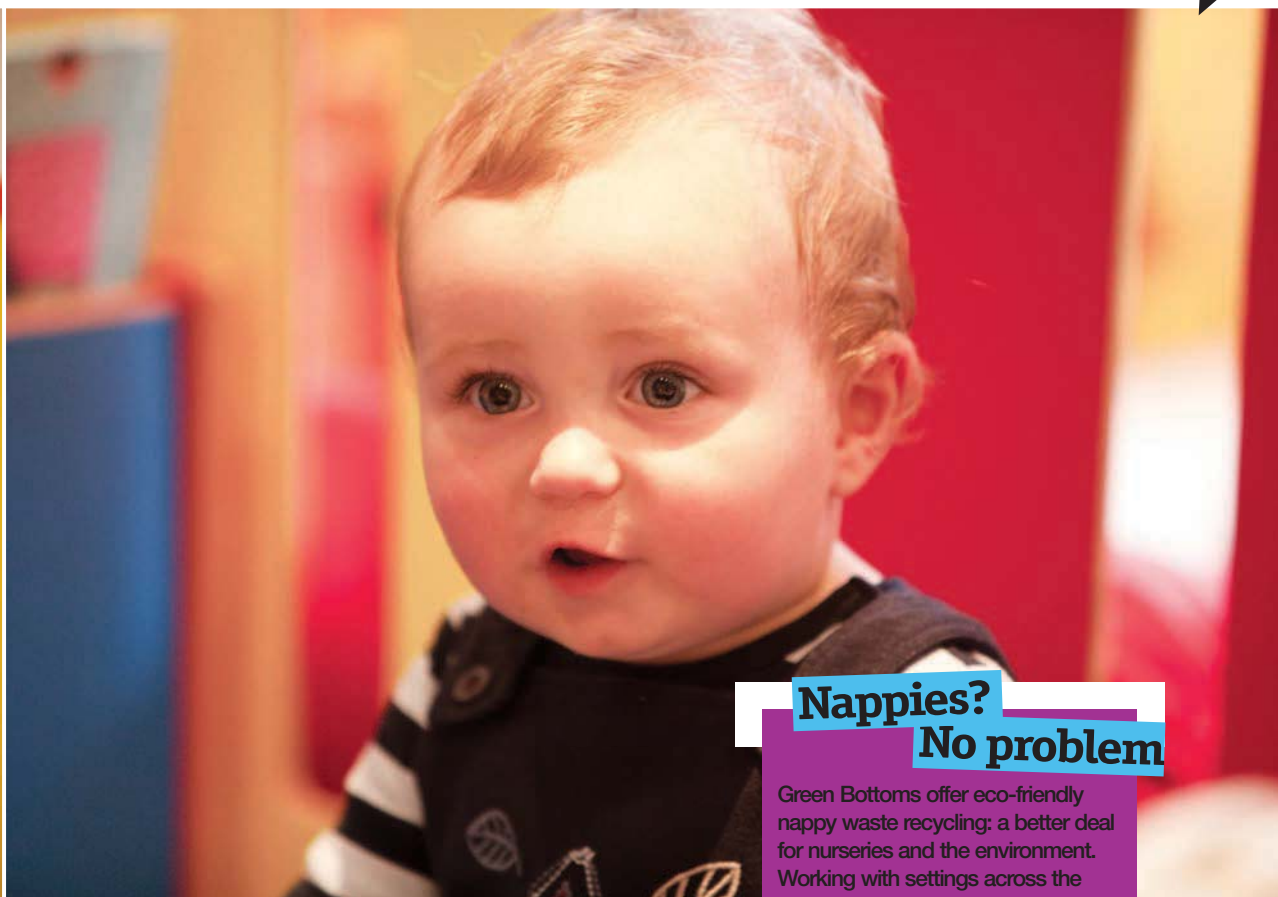
EYFS practitioners have a duty of care to ensure that babies are exposed to language and communication. We live in a society now where we increasingly engage with machines in a one-sided conversation. This is passive interaction, and no substitute for 'real talk'. As adults, we spend long periods of time interacting with the latest gadgets from smart phones to tablet computers. These valuable ICT resources are dominating our lives and are accepted within our society. They are, however, not to be seen as replacements for conversation, which is why the

Small talk – a checklist

As a practitioner, how many of the following are you doing when engaging with babies in your care?

- Making eye contact and being at their level
- Pulling faces
- Using gesture
- Making sounds
- Inventing fun words that don't always make sense but that enjoy the richness of the sounds that we can create
- Using intonation
- Repeating and echoing
- Narrating what is happening
- Singing, spontaneously as well as in groups

- Naming objects that are of interest to the baby
- Questioning with a purpose, and meaningfully
- Extending – not always using single words, but building up to simple sentences (and as babies become older and more mobile building sentences up with verbs and adjectives)
- Allowing space for silence
- Pausing
- Making links/connections to important objects and people in a baby's life
- Using children's names/being personal.



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findoutmore

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research into face-to-face and away-facing prams conducted by the National Literacy Trust on the Talk to your Baby website (talktoyourbaby.com) is important, reporting that “young children need face-to-face communication to fully develop as sociable talkers and learners.” I cringe when I see parents or carers pushing babies in prams whilst they are either engaged in conversation on their mobile phones or listening to an MP3 player, ignoring the baby who is eager for communication. One area for consideration for professionals within daycare settings is the choice of buggies for when they are taking babies out on walks. These tend to be all forward facing, with the adults, who are deep in conversation with their colleagues, pushing from the rear. If carer-facing multiple buggies are not available then the practitioners need to think of how they can communicate with these young children as they walk to the park.

Adults within settings also need to consider how they speak to the very young children in their care. How often do we approach babies from behind and move them without explaining to them what is happening? When lifting up an infant, we should show respect by telling him or her where we are going and for what reason, just as we would with an older person. The tone of

talk with this age group should be soft and lilting, demonstrating pitch and intonation. Trevarthen and Maloch (2002) write of the concept of ‘motherese’, which is defined as the speech used by adults to young children while they are learning to speak, typically using shortened expressions, clear pronunciation, a high-pitched voice and often with exaggerated intonation patterns. This is the type of speech that mothers naturally tend towards; so it is important that practitioners emulate this model, not only to develop communication but also to further establish the bond between themselves and their charges.

One way in which managers, room leaders and practitioners themselves can evaluate whether quality interaction is occurring is to get a colleague to observe them in practice and tick off the occasions when any of the above are observed. Another useful exercise is to video carers when they are interacting with babies. I have found this second method a very successful way of demonstrating to practitioners how they can further develop their interactions. When viewing the recording it is usually the carer who becomes very aware of how he or she dominates the ‘talking space’ and uses language with very young children. Frequently the adult will reflect on how the interaction could be improved by being more natural and removing the element of forcing the language that is the intended outcome.

This naturalness of language can be seen in the work of Carr and Lee (2012), which clearly demonstrates the importance of children’s learning stories; records of the journeys that babies and children have been on, recognising



the importance that cultural and community identities have on their development. If adults key into these cultural journeys, by knowing the children and their families well, the language that they use will be meaningful and challenging. Carr and Lee’s research shows how very young children can engage with their learning journey folders, as they ‘read’ them with others, pointing and gesturing as they recall and make connections with the things they see in the photographs and interacting with the other person as they share these memories.