Tales from the TotemPole: babies

Award-winning trainer **Mary Barlow** shares stories about how practitioners can support the development of children of all ages...

It's easy to believe that babies' psychological needs will be met by ensuring that they feel safe and secure. However, from a surprisingly early age, they are learning to make predictions, and to influence the world through their own actions; helping babies understand their world and make simple choices supports their social and emotional development.

Take four-month-old Martha. She's lying on a silver foil blanket, obviously enjoying the experience; her legs kick vigorously, her face is alight with pleasure and she crows ecstatically as the foil crackles and light flashes on the shiny surface. Occasionally, however, she pauses, her face serious for several moments before she renews her kicking, and delight spreads across her face again.

Why does Martha repeatedly stop and then start kicking? Perhaps she is testing whether it is her actions which are having such a wonderful effect. Is it really her making this happen? Like a scientist she tests her theory several times and is delighted when she is proved right! Her joy is probably caused as much by the knowledge that she is making it happen as by the effect itself.

LITTLE POINTER: Close observation helps us find out so much about pre-verbal children, and to witness their developing self-awareness.

In contrast, Lucy, who cares for eight-month-old Leo, is perturbed when, on taking a spoonful of carrot, he bursts into tears. He is quickly comforted and goes on to enjoy the rest of the bowl. Later, a discussion with his parents reveals that they have been giving him apricots; the orange purée looks almost identical to the carrot. It wasn't that he did not like carrots; it was just not what he was expecting! Not only did Leo have no control over his environment, cues that he thought he understood turned out to be wrong.

LITTLE POINTER: Our own observations, communicating with all carers and carefully interpreting the evidence helps us see the world from a baby's point of view.

New understanding

Lucy begins to make a point of giving Leo a small spoonful to taste at the beginning of each meal, asking "I wonder what's for dinner today?" Her tone warns him that this might be something new; he is interested and alert. However, when, a few days later, he tries peas, Lucy realises that he dislikes them. She does not try to make him eat them and helps his parents to realise that by giving in to his wishes they will not make him a fussy eater; supporting Leo to recognise and express his own preferences will help him to develop into a confident child, willing to try new tastes and experiences.

When Martha's parents arrive they are surprised to find that she had enjoyed playing with the foil blanket; her older brother would have hated the noise close to his ears! With the help of nursery staff they are gradually beginning to learn that what they thought they had learned about babies when their son was born does not apply to all children; Martha has a completely different temperament and interests to him. They need to start from scratch as they learn about their wonderful new daughter.

LITTLE POINTER: We have much to learn from parents about their children, but sometimes our role is to sensitively help them find out about their children too.

Emotional support

Supporting babies' emotional development is about so much more than making them feel safe and secure. Taking the time needed to help children understand their world and make simple choices will lead to happier babies who have the best chance of growing into confident children.

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Mary is an early years consultant and trainer, and has worked across the private, public and voluntary sectors, including management roles in Barnardo's and Sure Start programmes. She is the founder of The Totem Pole early years training and resource centre, and last September won 'Trainer of the Year' at the 2011 *Nursery World* Awards. Visit thetotempole.co.uk or call 01476 578 200.