

SUPPORTING CHILDREN UNDER 2 WITH COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the changes in funding for early years provision, many settings are currently exploring the possibility of providing support for younger children for the first time. Some practitioners are understandably nervous about caring for very young children if this is outside their recent experience. At the Yorkshire and Humber Stronger Practice Hub, we are addressing this by hosting a short 3-session course in January, February and March next year, focusing on communication development in under 2s.

Why is communication development so important at this age?

Babies are hard-wired to tune into communication and language even before birth. Research shows that babies calm when they hear their mother's voice whilst they are still in the womb. We are social animals who need to communicate with each other to manage all areas of our lives so it makes sense that babies start learning communication right away.

Research also shows that language learning directly supports babies' brain development. When babies are born, their brains are not yet fully developed (if they were, their heads would be too big to fit through their mother's pelvis). At birth a baby's brain is about a quarter the size of an adult's. By age 3 it has grown and developed to about 80% of an adult size. Many factors influence this rapid development but one of the most important is a warm responsive relationship with a carer that involves 1-1 human interaction. The amount of parent: child interaction a child receives has been shown to directly influence the child's cognitive development. Children who are accessing early years settings will receive some of that interaction from their carers.

On top of the impact on brain development, language learning is important for communication of course too. Children who have early language can build relationships, express themselves and communicate their emotions. These skills give children a firm foundation to build social and emotional wellbeing and reduce frustration. Language allows children to develop schemas for categorising and organising their world. These skills are essential for other areas of learning and development.

What is important to provide?

The good news is that we all have the skills to support babies' communication development. Most of us do it naturally without even thinking about it. The same strategies that support our 3-5 year olds apply to younger children too. We can summarise support for under 2 year olds with '**3 Ts**'...

- **Talk More**
- **Tune In**
- **Take Turns**



1. TALK MORE

The most important approach is simply 'modelling language' (see EEF evidence store for more details). The biggest predictor of young children's language skills is the amount of language they have heard. By the time they are 3 children will have heard anything between 10-45 million words. That is a big range and we know that when it comes to talking it is a case of more is more. Children with access to the most language will be hearing up to 2000 words per hour but for children with the least this will fall to around 600 words per hour. By age 3 there is a measurable 'word gap' between the language and cognitive development of the children who have heard most or least words. Hearing this language as part of a responsive interaction is even better - studies show that words heard on television or from an app are not retained as well as words spoken by a parent or carer.



So we need to be modelling language all the time. How do we do this? At this very young age quantity is more important than quality. We can reassure parents that any talk is good, they don't have to be specifically teaching words. As a speech and language therapist I often recommend 'narrating your own life'. Give your baby a commentary of what you are doing throughout the day. You might feel silly saying 'I'm putting my shoes on...oh where's your hat...it's a bit cold today' to start with but your baby is loving it. Natural talk describing and explaining what you're doing right now is perfect. If we're focussing on increasing the number of words babies hear we can encourage talking during play, during routines, whilst out on a walk (face to face seating in a buggy is best for this), in the car and anywhere else we can think of!

2. TUNE IN

Whilst the amount of language children hear is our number one priority, if we can tune in to our babies and map language accordingly it can be even more impactful. We talk about 'OWL-ing' when working with early language learners which stands for 'observe, wait and listen' (Hanan). Take a step back and observe your babies and toddlers. How are they communicating already - this might be by using different cries, body language, facial expression or different noises. If you start to learn what they might be trying to say you can model that language at the same time e.g. 'Oh you've hurt yourself...let me have a look'. If you are able to model the words they need at the right time it will help the child make a connection between the word and the feeling or activity. Tuning in also means getting down on their level so you can see what has caught their interest from a baby perspective.

As you tune in you will see what sorts of things your baby is interested in and be able to model that language too. Some babies love shapes and colours, some are more tuned into sounds or music. Again we can use this information to talk about things that are relevant to them in the moment.



3. TAKE TURNS

In the best conversations we take turns to speak and turns to listen. We've all had conversations where everyone is speaking all over each other and we know that can be frustrating and counter productive. That back and forth of interaction can be modelled straight from birth. When we speak to our babies we can leave a space for them to respond. Watch and listen to their response; it might be a look, a gurgle or sound or a body movement e.g. waving their arms in excitement.



We can then take a turn by adding some more words or by responding in the same way they do. If when you're tuning into the child you notice they use particular sounds to express themselves try using those sounds yourself and see how they respond. Copy their actions and play and follow their lead e.g. by copying them banging on the high chair tray and see how they respond. Babies adore being copied and if you watch an adult interacting with a small baby you will often see them copying the child automatically. A baby gurgles or vocalises and the responsive adult repeats it and smiles. As well as being super cute this is giving the baby the feedback that they have been noticed, listened to and responded to.

In this way babies learn they can influence the adults around them by making different faces and sounds and eventually this will develop into language.

CONCLUSION

The 3 Ts are a quick way to think about how we interact with babies and very young children to support their language development.

When we meet up in January for the online sessions we'll be looking at very early communication in more detail. This will include looking at developmental milestones, applying the 3 Ts to your setting/activities and how to work with parents to support their child's development.

We'll also dip into topics such as the use of dummies, the relationship between weaning and talking, using alternative forms of communication with very young children and working with young children with additional needs.

If this sounds like something you'd like to join in with just email natalie.sph@childhaven.n-yorks.sch.uk for more information.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

References & Further Reading

- Weitzmann (2017) It Take two to Talk guidebook. c/o Hanen Centre <https://www.hanen.org/>
- EEF Evidence store - [https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/EY Teaching and Modelling_Language Technical Summary.pdf](https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/EY_Teaching_and_Modelling_Language_Technical_Summary.pdf)
- Speech and Language UK: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/ages-and-stages/>
- Talk to your baby campaign - information for parents <http://www.talktoyourbaby.org/>
- Early Words Matter - <https://literacytrust.org.uk/early-words-matter/>
- Words for Life - <https://wordsforlife.org.uk/parent-support/chatting-your-baby/>
- What helps support parent-child interaction in the early years <https://foundations.org.uk/our-work/publications/foundations-for-life-what-works-to-support-parent-child-interaction-in-the-early-years/>

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THANK YOU FOR READING



Helen Harron qualified as a speech and language therapist in 1993. She has worked for 30 years predominantly with pre-school and primary school aged children with a wide range of speech, language and communication needs in the NHS, voluntary and independent sectors. She is the co-owner of Seaside SaLT (Speech and Language Therapy), a not-for-profit company based in Scarborough providing speech and language therapy services to children from 0-18 along the North Yorkshire Coast.

