

# More than words

Baby room practitioners need to tune in to those in their care by understanding the babies' non-verbal communication, as well as their own, explains **Charlotte Goddard**

**A** mother is interacting with her baby, face to face. Her gestures are enthusiastic, her facial expressions animated; the infant responds by smiling and pointing. The mother turns away, and when she looks back, her face has lost all expression. The baby immediately notices something is wrong: first she tries to return the interaction to its usual reciprocal pattern with her own body language, then she turns her head away, then she begins to cry and twist her body in distress.

Known as the still-face experiment, this video shows the importance of non-verbal communication when interacting with a baby. The experiment shows babies have a sense of the relationship between facial expression and emotion and are able to use their own facial expression and body language to communicate feelings and desires.

'The baby seeks out communication and if it is not reciprocated, they will stop seeking it out,' says Liz Wood, speech and language advisor for communications charity I CAN. The complex back-and-forth between carer and baby, where a carer responds to a baby's individual body language and mood and gives the infant the opportunity to communicate back, is known as the 'dance of reciprocity'. It is a vital part of an infant's development, laying the foundations for communication as a whole as well as helping a child feel safe and secure.

'Proximity, touch, being at the same level are important for attachment as well as language development,' says Ms Wood. 'If children feel safe they can explore the world, if they are anxious they are less likely to explore. Non-verbal interactions are very important in early development,



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brain growth is rapidly occurring and connections are being made.'

## WHAT BABIES ARE TELLING US

Practitioners in a busy baby room may need to make a conscious effort to develop the skills needed to 'tune in' to a baby's non-verbal communication in order to meet their needs. 'One of the things people mistakenly think with babies is because they are pre-verbal, they don't understand things,' says Veronica Lawrence, specialist senior educational psychologist (early years) and co-founder of the Northamptonshire Baby Room Project. 'It is important for practitioners to understand infants are communicating all the time.'

Early language consultant Debbie Brace trains early years practitioners in approaches to baby talk and play. 'Right from birth, for example, babies are turning away from the light to say it is too bright,' she says. 'From a very early age babies will shake their heads or turn away: that is a signal meaning "I have had enough", or "I am protecting myself from the stimulation".'

## General signals and unique messages

Non-verbal communication that babies might engage in at different stages includes yawning to indicate tiredness, alert eyes and an upturned mouth indicating pleasure and a willingness to interact, and pushing away unwanted touch or objects. However, Ms Lawrence stresses the need for a caregiver to tune into the unique responses of a particular baby, as every infant will have their own non-verbal language. 'An open palm with one child might signal "It's OK", but with another it might be a stress response,' she says. 'We have to know the infant well enough to say this is what it means.'

The Baby Room Project training encourages practitioners to observe one infant very closely over three months. 'We ask practitioners to put themselves in the baby's shoes,' says Ms Lawrence. 'What do I – the baby – do when someone comes into the room? What do I do when I am feeling tired?'

## RESPONDING APPROPRIATELY

Once a practitioner has learned to understand a baby's non-verbal

## BETTER UNDERSTANDING

Practitioners can improve their communication with babies and help babies develop their own non-verbal communication skills by:

- turning to face the child and using lots of eye contact
- using exaggerated facial expressions and tones of voice
- bending down to a child's level
- building communication into the daily routine, such as when changing a nappy

- 'mirroring' a child by using the same facial expression or tone of voice
- using a relaxed body posture and facial expression
- videoing interactions and looking at their non-verbal communication and that of the baby
- sharing their experience of a baby's non-verbal communication with parents and modelling interactions that show how the baby responds positively.

communication, it is vital they respond appropriately, both with words and actions. 'It really matters that the response fits with the communication,' says Ms Brace. 'Not all of the time, mistakes are fine, but a "good enough" number of attuned responses are absolutely required for the baby's development. They can only learn to understand their own feelings if their feelings are responded to appropriately – so, if a baby yawns, they are telling you they are tired, and the next thing that needs to happen is that they go to sleep.'

## Challenges

Such an attuned response is difficult to achieve when early years practitioners may be looking after three babies at once, and may be distracted by the everyday demands and routines of a busy and noisy baby room.

'I ask practitioners what gets in the way of them being in the moment with the baby, and they say there are three babies and only one of me, or the fact that my nursery says mealtime is at 11.30am, not when the baby is communicating it is hungry,' says Ms Brace. 'Some of that you can't control. But I ask practitioners to try for just five moments of connection during the day. For example, a baby yawns, you say "Ah, you are tired, you are rubbing your eyes" – that takes seconds.'

## During the daily routines

While putting aside special time for tuning into a baby's non-verbal communication and reciprocating is great, it is in the daily routine that the best chances for interaction are found. 'Nappy changing is perfect,' says Ms Wood. 'They are on a table, it is great for face-to-face contact, and every baby has its nappy changed.'



## NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

As behaviour experts are constantly reminding us, we communicate much more through our body language than through the spoken word. Non-verbal communication includes facial expressions, eye contact, aspects of the voice, gestures and body movements, touch and physical distance between people. All can have an effect, positive or negative, on the children or adults we are 'speaking' to.

## This series aims to help practitioners:

- develop their understanding of children's non-verbal communication
- reflect on their own non-verbal communication, its impact and how it can be improved

## What children are 'saying' through pointing

Pointing is one way that babies communicate clearly, and there are two types of pointing. When a young child points at something they want, it is referred to as proto-imperative pointing. This gesture allows the child to convey direct messages to adults, even though they can't use words. 'Proto-declarative' or 'declarative' pointing follows a little later, and is used when a baby wants to talk about something. By using this gesture, the child recognises that the other person has a mind, can see the same as the child, and that they too can think about something that is of interest to the child, says Michael Jones, author of *Talking and Learning With Young Children*.

'If an older baby is pointing at something, they may well mean "look at that, it's interesting, talk to me about it", rather than "I want that",' he says. 'Go down to their level, or pick them up so you are looking at the same thing, and then everything the practitioner says will then make sense to the child, because they are both looking at the same item.'

'The child has initiated a conversation by pointing. It doesn't work if you sit opposite them and say "What's that?" because then the child is not inviting the conversation.'

If a baby is too young to point, a practitioner can also follow their gaze to observe what they are looking at and talk about it with them.

## AVOIDING MIXED MESSAGES

As well as tuning into a baby's non-verbal communication and responding to it, adults need to be aware of their own non-verbal communication and how it





# non-verbal communication: babies

impacts the babies they are caring for. When non-verbal communication sends a different message from words, such as a positive comment delivered in a grumpy tone of voice, a baby is more likely to understand the non-verbal communication.

'Research shows babies gaze at people's eyes, so you could be saying lovely things but with frustration and upset coming through in your eyes,' says Ms Lawrence. 'That's confusing for them.'

## Tone of voice: match and respond

Ms Brace says practitioners should ensure their tone of voice fits with the feelings a baby is communicating, even when that is challenging. 'If a baby is distressed and we respond in a way that does not fit that distress, such as saying in a jolly upbeat tone, "Let's look outside! Mummy will be back later!"; the tone does not match the baby's communication, and they will be very confused.'

'You can use a more sympathetic tone, saying, "Oh mummy's gone, you must be sad", and that will help the baby work through that difficult feeling,' she continues. 'Match and respond rather than mis-attune. If you acknowledge the baby's difficulty with your face, tone and body language, the baby thinks "I am allowed to feel rotten".'

## Eye contact

When it comes to non-verbal communication, it is important to

make eye contact with a baby, and maintain an open posture and positive facial expressions. This generally means being face to face when communicating with a child.

'A large part of any message comes from cues; if the child is facing another way, they are missing out on half of the meaning,' says Ms Wood.

This means forward-facing buggies should be avoided, as they can lead to children becoming confused and losing interest in what people are saying.

## Touch

Touch is another form of non-verbal communication which can be positive or negative. 'Touch and smell are the way babies process their environment, and they have a massive effect on brain development,' says Ms Lawrence. 'Gentle touch will release feel-good chemicals in a baby's brain, while harsh or cursory touch will release stress chemicals, so the brain is shaping up to have higher levels of stress. Of course, there is also a need for boisterous play, but babies need to feel safe.'

## ROLE-MODELLING BODY LANGUAGE

Role-modelling positive non-verbal communication such as appropriate



## MORE INFORMATION

- **Working with Babies and Children: From birth to three** by Jools Page, Ann Clare and Cathy Nutbrown
- **'All about...baby room projects'** by Kathy Gooch and Sacha Powell, [www.nurseryworld.co.uk](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk)
- **The Still Face experiment** by Dr Edward Tronick, <https://bit.ly/2IAXcbX>

facial expression and warm body language will help babies to understand this language and develop their own, which in turn will lay the foundations for building relationships in the future.

Being able to read the body language of others allows us to understand when we can interrupt, when we have talked too much, whether someone is joking, and even whether someone can be trusted – all important skills. A failure to develop adequate non-verbal conversational skills before a baby starts to talk has been linked to subsequent behavioural difficulties, says Mr Jones.

As adults, it seems we can forget that babies may not be able to talk, but they are communicating all the time. Be amazed at what a baby is showing you. ■



## Dr Jools Page, senior early years lecturer at the University of Brighton, best known for her conceptualisation of 'Professional Love'

'In the wake of recent child abuse scandals, practitioners who work with infants can shy away from making normal and natural relationships with babies and toddlers which include close intimate attachment because they are fearful of being accused of wrongdoing. Although I understand these concerns, I also really worry about what messages we are giving to young children if practitioners are too scared to cuddle babies.'

'The idea of a practitioner trying to imagine what it feels like to be in the shoes of the baby, to "de-centre", is good practice but also quite a challenge because self-reflection and self-awareness are critical skills that take time to develop.'

'Infant/toddler practitioners need to be well supported by leaders, managers and colleagues who recognise the rights of babies' voices to be heard. In my view, building safe, secure attachment relationships which foster a baby's capacity for learning is emotionally demanding and

organisationally challenging, yet it is the most vital role in early years practice, and the most rewarding too.'

'Practitioners who feel confident about their role as caregivers, are well informed and reflective and are able to make suitable attachment relationships with infants, toddlers and their families are very well placed in their role as key person to support young children's developing language and communication skills.'

'Skilful and attuned practitioners who understand the individual characteristics of their key children will be well versed in each child's unique pace and stage of development in line with what is typically expected; able also to work sensitively with parents of children who may be displaying a cause for concern.'

'My research and experience have led me to believe that babies and young children who attend early years settings flourish best in the company of professionals who are intellectually capable, emotionally resilient and self-reflective, which is precisely the reason why we need the best staff working with our youngest citizens.'

## a point of view