Eye to eye

Understanding non-verbal communication will help practitioners get on with parents, finds ***Charlotte Goddard***

Positive body language should be shown to children as well as parents

Partnership working between parents and practitioners is central to the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, in some instances, the demands of the EYFS and other policy initiatives could actually be creating a rift between the two, making some parents feel judged and patronised.

Nursery practitioner Anna Max researched parent/practitioner relationships for her Master's dissertation. 'The EYFS has got this agenda of practitioners spotting problems and educating parents how, as a partnership, we will deal with this problem, but nothing that says the opinions of the parents need to be respected,' she says.

Early years practitioners are increasingly charged with 'spotting problems', whether in relation to obesity, so-called 'school readiness' or dental health, and Ms Max feels this attitude can drive a particular approach to communication with parents. 'The approach is very much around positioning parents as problematic,' she says.

Lena Engel, a freelance early years specialist, agrees, 'Parents often feel lots of demands are being made on them that they don't understand. They can feel as if they are not being heard and what they say is not worth listening to anyway.'

Even if practitioners are careful with the words they use, their frustration or judgements of parents can leak through into their non-verbal communication. This includes body language such as leaning forward, tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions. These subconscious movements often send powerful messages.

POWER BASE

Teresa Wilson is programme director at the University of Reading and author of *How to Develop Partnerships with Parents: A practical guide for the early years* – published this month by Routledge. She says, 'Practitioners can sometimes find it frustrating to work with parents, but it is important to build a trusting relationship from the start using very positive body language. Once trust is there, judgement can be reduced, because you are beginning to understand the parent better. You may learn a parent has got a lot of issues to manage that may be causing the things that develop the frustration.' (See box.)

Body language can sometimes indicate that power rests with one side of a relationship. 'Parents are experts on their own children, but they may feel the practitioner's qualifications give them greater expertise,' says Ms Wilson. 'Try to bring communication onto a level platform so the parent feels part of the process of learning and working with a child.'

Some gestures to avoid include the obvious, such as looking shocked or gasping, as well as expressions such as frowning, nose wrinkling, laughing at a parent's suggestion, or putting a hand over your mouth as if stopping yourself from disagreeing, says Ms Wilson. 'Without intending, there are things we do to maintain the power base.'

MIRRORING

In other cases, practitioners may feel anxious about communicating with parents. 'It can be difficult: maybe they are not the room lead, the parent is going off to a job in the City – the power relationships are quite challenging and can go both ways,' says Ms Wilson.

Anita Hughes, co-author of *Building Positive Relationships with Parents of Young Children: A guide to effective communication*, says a technique called 'mirroring' can help communication. 'Mirroring is not about just copying what someone is doing: it is more about tuning in to someone,' she explains. 'For example, if you have a parent who is quite loud, you might use strong body language and tone to communicate with them, whereas if you have a parent who is timid and nervous, you moderate your behaviour so you are more gentle with that person.'

> Without intending, there are things we do to maintain the power base

Tuning in to someone's non-verbal communication can defuse conflict. 'If a parent is hysterical and angry, you don't want to mirror them completely,' explains Ms Hughes. 'You might start out by speaking strongly and clearly, and then bring the conversation down gradually to a good communication level. If their voice is high-pitched and they are breathing quickly, slow your breathing down and their breathing may follow.'

If a parent is nervous, begin with a quieter tone of voice but gradually become more confident, to bring the conversation up to a more even keel.

WARM WELCOME

The first contact parents have with practitioners sets the tone for the future, so non-verbal communication needs to convey a warm welcome from the off.

Ms Engel, who works with parents delivering advice and training, says, 'It is surprising how often settings do not think it is important to create a welcoming atmosphere. You want staff to look smiling and happy, like they are listening when you speak to them. Early years practitioners sometimes forget they are delivering a service

PHOTOS ADOBE STOCK

that parents are buying into as well as being in the education sector.'

For Ms Engel, a welcoming atmosphere is engendered not only by the staff's facial expressions. 'It is also whether places are tidy, and staff members looking clean and smart.' A practitioner's body language towards a child will also communicate a good deal to the parent. 'Parents notice if staff are bending down and being lovely with the children,' she says.

TRAINING

Communicating with parents is not often covered in training, says Ms Wilson. 'Managers should think about spending time with practitioners talking about these things.'

Ms Hughes suggests a useful exercise. 'You could think about situations where you encounter strangers, and how those people respond to you: what do they do to make you think they are a good waiter, for example? Or think about the parents who come across as friendly and those who do not – how is it they behave that makes you make that judgement?'

As adolescents spend more time communicating using screens, researchers have found that young people are less likely to develop skills such as the ability to read facial expressions. This makes it even more important to ensure staff have a knowledge of non-verbal communication techniques. 'When so much of life is carried out through text media, young people may find it difficult to make small talk,' says Ms Hughes. However, Ms Engel says she has found the youngest staff can be the most engaging in terms of eye contact and smiles.

Anita Mellor is senior nursery manager at Action for Children's Spring at Acorn Childcare Centre, RAF Cosgrove. She ensures staff have the opportunity to reflect on their body language. 'It has to be at the front of our minds all the time,' she says. 'We do a lot of role-modelling to help with this during staff meetings. I might ask one person to model showing a parent around, and we would see how they are coming across – are they smiling and happy, for example?'

Inanimate objects can also be a form of communication. Are the pictures on the walls inclusive and welcoming to parents from different cultures, for example, or to dads as well as mums, or to parents with disabilities?

Acorn has an innovative way of communicating non-verbally with parents, through 'deployment bags'. As a setting linked to an RAF base, parents are often abroad for long periods, and the bags are sent across the world to keep them in contact with the setting, including samples of their child's art work.

IN CONVERSATION

When it comes to tricky conversations, it is particularly important for practitioners to be careful their body language is not giving off the wrong message.

Such a conversation should not take place standing up in a public place where the practitioner may give the impression, by glancing at a clock or shifting their attention to something happening in the room, that they are rushed.

'We have areas we can go to have difficult conversations, where we can sit and make a cup of tea,' says Ms Max. 'I have been in settings where that conversation happens at the doorway, and that gives a power imbalance and puts both parties on the defensive.'

TUNE IN

It is easy to misinterpret the gestures of others. In one instance, recalls Ms Wilson, a stressed mother folded her arms not out of anger but because she was trying to hide the milk leaking from her breasts. In another case, an older father's body language was due not to rudeness but his poor hearing. Gestures can also have different meanings in different cultures: in some countries, for example, smiling may be taken as a sign of stupidity or deceit.

To fully understand someone's body language, you need to reflect on their beliefs, values and preferences, as well as motivation in the situation. It is vital to tune in to the parents you are working with, getting to know them well: only then can their non-verbal communication help you to build a positive partnership.

top tips

- Give full attention to the parent you are talking to
- Nod your head occasionally to show you are listening
- Have consistent eye contact but don't stare – glance away sometimes!
- Have a relaxed, open posture without crossed arms, but stand straight
- Focus on the parent – not on what is going on around you
- Remember a smile can make a huge difference
- Be aware of your actions, such as watching the clock or folding your arms
- Be aware of personal space
- Look interested in what the parent has to say

FURTHER READING

- *Working with Parents, Carers and Families in the Early Years: The essential guide* by Teresa Wilson (Routledge, 2015)
- *How to Develop Partnerships with Parents: A practical guide for the early years* by Teresa Wilson – published this month by Routledge
- *Building Positive Relationships with Parents of Young Children: A guide to effective communication* by Anita Hughes and Veronica Read (Routledge, 2012)
- *Working with Parents of Children with Special Educational Needs* by Chris Dukes and Maggie Smith (SAGE, 2007)