

On message?

How adults communicate non-verbally with children aged three to five has a profound effect on self-esteem and self-belief, explains **Charlotte Goddard**

Three- to five-year-olds are putting in place the foundations for learning, including self-confidence, resilience, problem-solving and the ability to take in new information. Our behaviour as adults can help or hinder them in that cognitive journey.

'Unspoken messages can lay the foundation for fear and lack of confidence, or equally for mastery and resilience,' says early years consultant Kathryn Solly. 'A parent may be holding a child's arm when he or she is balancing on a low wall, and the child says "let go", but the parent is hanging on for dear life. If this behaviour continues, then the child accepts this as the status quo – "when I walk on a wall I must have my hand held".'

Overprotected children might get the message that they can't attempt new challenges without an adult. However, if adults stay calm when watching children climbing wet logs, for example, and refrain from rushing over to help children who slip, hovering behind with arms outstretched, or gasping when a child stumbles, they send a different message. Children understand that they are trusted to problem-solve, perhaps finding their own ways around the more wobbly logs.

On the other hand, an adult's behaviour can put children under pressure by sending the message they should be able to deal with something that they can't – by lifting them up onto a climbing frame, for example.

SPEAKING VOLUMES

Non-verbal communication is not just about what you set out to communicate: people's conscious and subconscious thoughts and feelings tend to 'leak' through their body language and behaviour.

'The classic body language of



someone who doesn't want to be outside, because it is cold and wet, is that they stand there with their arms folded, or cradling a coffee cup,' says Ms Solly. 'That speaks volumes to the children: they know when an adult is not comfortable. It can especially be the case with supply staff – I have sent someone home before because the non-spoken messages they were giving out were negative.'

'When I appointed staff, I would have them interact with children as part of the interview. I would send children up to them with an insect – they didn't have to touch it but I would look at how they interacted with the child, if they showed interest in what the child was showing them.'

'You might be afraid of spiders

but you don't have to pass that on to the child.'

COMMUNICATING PREJUDICE

Children pay a huge amount of attention to adult body language. 'From the age of one, children are picking up cues from others and inferring information about objects and events from their reactions to them,' says Rod Parker-Rees, visiting research fellow at Plymouth Institute of Education and former joint programme leader of the university's Early Childhood Studies programme. While this process can be an effective way of learning, research has also shown that adults can communicate conscious or unconscious biases and prejudices through their body language and behaviour.

Researchers in the USA asked 135 pre-school teachers to watch videos of groups of racially diverse children and detect challenging behaviour. Eye-tracking technology found the teachers spent more time watching black children, and they were more likely to say black boys were behaving badly when in fact none were. Young children are very aware of the adult gaze and readily tune into messages about who is 'better' than who at a time when they are beginning to create a picture of their own identity.

Ellie Mulcahy, former Reception teacher and now senior research associate at education and youth think-tank LKMco, says, 'Racial bias is a sensitive area, and it is hard for people to acknowledge that we all hold unconscious bias and might be doing certain things that create unconscious bias around race in young children – although I do think it is happening. However, gender stereotyping is also so insidious in our society; even if you are trying to be aware of it, it is easy to catch yourself doing something unconsciously, or to find you have

Children feel trusted if they are allowed to take risks

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case study: Stramash

What we say to children in their formative years can influence their thoughts and feelings about themselves, but our behaviour towards them, each other and the world in general has even more of an impact, says Jess Greenhill, outdoor practitioner at Stramash Social Enterprise, which runs four outdoor nurseries in Scotland. Stramash practitioners keep a close eye on children to give advice where needed, but ensure their body language gives a child the message that they are trusted.

'With rough-and-tumble play, for example, we would observe, maybe get a bit closer, checking everyone is still consenting, but not wade in straight away,' she says. 'We are saying we are here, you are in a safe space, if you are not happy you can catch my eye and I will step in.'

A practitioner's behaviour and body language will depend on how a child is feeling in a specific situation. 'On one day a child might want to explore alone, on another day they might want to hold a hand – we are not pushing them into something they are not ready for.'

At Stramash, practitioners model resilience and self-care by their behaviour, for example around their reactions to weather conditions. 'If it is raining, we put our hoods up and carry on as normal, showing we can still have fun in more challenging weather,' says Ms Greenhill.

Young children are natural scientists, and an adult's reaction to the natural world can either nurture that scientific curiosity or encourage fear and disgust. 'We sometimes come across dead animals,' says Ms Greenhill. 'You could be freaked out, but how we react in that moment is an incredible opportunity for learning. Assuming it is not too far gone, I will put gloves on, explain to the children why you don't pick it up with bare hands, and we will take an up-close look at it, and discuss what might have happened, like a mini-CSI.'



certain expectations of girls but not of boys.'

Practitioners might find themselves swooping in to help a girl climbing a tree earlier than they would a boy, for example, sending her the message that she is less able to deal with challenging situations.

On the other hand, practitioners can model more inclusive gender roles, with female practitioners using tools and getting dirty, and male practitioners changing nappies and looking after crying children. Since children are hard-wired to pick up bias from adult body language, exposure to people with a diverse range of backgrounds and beliefs is the best way to dilute the effect.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Research has shown that teacher expectations of different children are leaked through very subtle behaviour – particularly around eye contact. One study found that when a child responded incorrectly to a question, teachers maintained longer eye contact if they had high expectations, and shorter if they had lower expectations. Other studies show teachers are more likely to smile at high-achievers.

'When you ask a child a question, you always have a level of expectation as to the likelihood the child will give the right answer, or if their answer will be slightly off and

you need to scaffold them, or you might suspect they will not be able to answer,' says Ms Mulcahy. 'We think we just hold that information in our head, but it can leak out through body language. This could create low self-esteem in one child, lowering their own expectations of what they can achieve, or high levels of anxiety in another who feels they are expected to know the answer.'

WARMTH

Increasing the frequency of your gaze is associated with increasing how much people perceive themselves as being liked by the gazer – we look more at people we like and less at people we don't like. People who 'look' more come across as being more trustworthy, persuasive, informed and friendly.

'One unspoken taboo among practitioners is that you find some children easier to deal with than others and have easier interactions with them,' says Ms Mulcahy. 'If a class of children are seeing you act a certain way to a specific child, they are likely to pick up on that and respond in the same way themselves. It is good to be aware of those feelings and try your best not to let it have an effect on your practice; we can all find things to like in every child we work with and have positive interactions with them.'



FURTHER READING

- **The Classroom X-Factor: The Power of Body Language and Non-verbal Communication in Teaching** by John White and John Gardner
- **Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?** by Walter Gilliam et al, <https://bit.ly/2vMzP94>

Teachers use their face to send messages as well as their words. If a child shows a picture, responding with slightly widened eyes and an expression of enthusiasm or awe encourages the child in their work, while merely saying it is lovely in a flat tone of voice, with poor eye contact and body directed away from the child will not have the same effect.

Some settings are worried about showing physical affection to children. However, quite apart from the feel-good hormones released through cuddling, physical connections help to aid early memory retention. Gestures also improve memory, creating a visual image in the brain. When teachers use gestures while talking, children have better recall of what they have learned, and when children are encouraged to gesture as well as verbally recall an experience, this has cognitive and communicative benefits.

Children's ability to read an adult's body language depends on their familiarity with that adult. 'Children are intrigued by how adults interact with each other because they are interested in how the world works,' says Mr Parker-Rees. 'The more you can behave naturally and normally, the more opportunity they have to learn these really important things, never mind colours and shapes.' ■