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**Learning to converse**

Children need to learn the rules of interaction and how to sustain the conversation as well as recognising speech and attempting communication. Hart and Risley (1999) and Singer (2001) emphasise the importance of ‘social reciprocity’ in this process and describe the way that children successfully communicate when they are able to engage in meaningful exchanges, turn-taking, interpreting and responding in order to maintain the interaction. Responsive adults behave as if they were in a real conversation with the baby and leave gaps for the baby to reply in the form of whole body movements, hand waving, excited noises or a smile (Trevarthen, 1993). This exchange is a sophisticated and sensitive process which requires inter-subjectivity to be successful as ‘learning a language is about co-ordinating what you do with what other people do’ (Gopnik et al (1999:101). Wells and Nicholls (1985) describe this inter-subjectivity established by care-givers as the probable foundation for ‘all subsequent communicative development’ (1985:6). This innate ability that mothers seem to have to apportion meaning to their babies early vocalisations and gestures, random coos and gurgles is more than indulging in baby talk it is the first stage of scaffolding.

**Motherese**

However children acquire language researchers have agreed that there is a common feature present in all languages when caregivers (and older siblings) interact with babies and toddlers and this is known as ‘motherese’ or infant directed speech (Snow and Ferguson, 1977). Motherese is characterised by short, grammatically simple sentences. The adult uses a higher-pitched voice and speaks at a slower pace, using repetitive and exaggerated expression. Most adults seem naturally attuned to this mode of interaction with young children and strengthen the supportive process by placing key words at the end of sentences, drawing attention to these through intonation and expression. Mothers who are in tune with their infants’ subtle development instinctively increase the level of complexity in their speech in order to help children take the next step in learning about communication (Henning et al, 2005).

Evidence from research about babies who have not been provided with this early positive experience of interaction indicates that not only is language development affected but also, without the presence of a responsive adult, children’s emotional, cognitive and social development is impaired. Goldschmeid and Selleck (1996: 11) describe the way that children discovered in state institutions (in Trieste, Italy in 1954) had become ‘withdrawn, passive and despairing’ as they had received adequate ‘physical care’ but limited ‘personal care’ and attention and had consequently given up trying to initiate relationships with others. Babies begin to perceive their own importance in the reflected gaze of their carers and this is a fundamental period in childhood when the sensitive responses of supportive adults can begin to build a child’s fundamental sense of self-esteem (Winnicott, 1971).

**Language acquisition and development**

The way that parents interact with their children plays a pivotal role in language development. The form and frequency of parent interaction has a significant impact on children’s vocabulary development, their ability to be articulate *and* it influences emerging literacy skills (Kokkinaki and Kugiumutzakis, 2000). We know from recent research aimed at supporting parents in communicating with their young children that ‘talkative parents have talkative children’ and that ‘early parent talk predicts later language ability’ (‘Face to Face’ research project, 2010).

When considering how language develops, theorists are involved in an on going debate about the dominance of nature v. nurture. Children are pre-programmed to acquire language and the brain is wired to support this process, particularly from birth to five years old (nature). Consequently this pre-disposition towards language acquisition indicates that nature has designed a clear path for children to follow. Conversely, opposing theorists maintain that the overriding influence on early language development is the language environment in which a child is raised (nurture).

Noam Chomsky (1965, 1972) suggested that all children are born with an inherent ability to acquire language and to decode sounds using their innate language acquisition device (LAD). This helps children to organise language according to appropriate linguistic rules including using grammatical knowledge to construct new sentences and phrases. Chomsky later defined this as the ‘Universal Grammar’ (UG) theory and uses this inborn ability infants have to explain how they learn phonology and grammar at an early age, despite being exposed to some limited ‘degenerate’ language models in their environment (e.g. motherese). Critics of this innate theory have argued that environment and, crucially, interaction with others plays a more significant role in language development than Chomsky implies (Bruner, 1983,Vygotsky, 1962). Jerome Bruner (1983) felt that the reciprocal relationship between the adult and child involved in conversation was the critical factor in helping children to develop their language and to make meaning from the interaction. He refers to this process as the ‘Language Acquisition Support System’ (LASS) as it acknowledges that successful interaction relies on the scaffolding that adults, who are in tune with children, are best able to provide and it is this type and level of conversation that helps children to move on a step in learning about language. Similarly, Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934) highlighted the relationship between dialogue (inner speech to self and interpersonal interaction) and cognitive awareness and maintained that: “language and thought are inseparable” (Vygotsky, 1978).