

Are you looking at me?

Understanding facial expression, tone of voice and gesture is crucial for the wellbeing of very young children, to their development of language, and how they will grow to use that language socially.



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Photographs courtesy of Luton Children's Centre Nursery and Abbie Rainbow-Dias

FOUR-YEAR-OLD IBRAHIM is sitting on the train with his mum. The lady sitting opposite smiles at him, and Ibrahim looks away. Later he asks his mum: 'Why did that lady smile at me? I didn't do anything funny.' Mum explains that grown-ups often smile at each other, and especially at children, and particularly when their eyes meet.

This leads to a long conversation about how Ibrahim was a very 'smiley' baby. He was so smiley, in fact, that from six-months-old it seemed that he would smile at everyone who looked at him. Mum is slightly misremembering, because Ibrahim actually smiled if you made eye contact with him first, and then smiled and spoke to him in an exaggerated voice. This changed when he was 12-months-old, so if you smiled at him he would look at mum's face, check if she was smiling, and then smile back at you. The development of Ibrahim's highly sophisticated reading and use of facial expression began at birth and will continue throughout his life.

Depending on what we read, we are told that 'body language' accounts for between 70 percent and 90 percent of communication. For years, I assumed that non-verbal communication is the icing on the cake of talking, that the verbal message is the most important thing, and that how we use gestures, facial expression and tone of voice as we speak merely supports understanding of what we say.

I was completely wrong, non-verbal communication is the cake and words are the icing. Understanding of facial expression, tone of voice and gesture is crucial for the wellbeing of very young children, their development of language, and how they grow to use language socially. I became convinced of this after meeting behaviour and communication specialist, Sioban Boyce. Sioban is author of *Identifying Non-Verbal Communication Difficulties – A life-changing approach*. This handbook looks at the skills that children learn from birth, and how to support older children and teenagers to develop the skills they need to be effective communicators.

My particular interest in meeting Sioban was to discover the extent to which these very early skills are needed for talking – not just for the development of early words, but how children will use these words to communicate their ideas with other people. Sioban worked for 18 years as a speech and language therapist, and made connections between failure to develop

adequate non-verbal conversational skills in the period before a baby starts to talk and subsequent behavioural difficulties, which affect children and teenagers' ability to learn, make and keep friends and how they contribute to family life.

Why faces are so important

Sioban took me on a tour of how children look at faces. This started for Ibrahim in the first 24 hours of life when he reflexively locked his gaze onto his mother's face. This was the beginning of their interaction. Professor Colwyn Trevarthen, in his detailed exploration of mother-infant interactions, describes the interactional synchrony between mother and very young child. Here, the infant and adult are so 'tuned into' each other that their movements and facial expressions mirror each other and seem almost like an intricate synchronised dance.

When the adult talks to the baby, usually in an exaggerated way, the adult and child have their faces very close to each other, and the baby's response will include sounds and facial expression. These interactions give baby plenty of practice with interpreting facial expressions and linking them to emotions and language. However, eye gaze and eye contact are not the same things. Ibrahim began by gazing fixedly into his mother's eyes, and as he grew he fixed his gaze onto bright lights and moving objects, such as balloons and the mobile hanging above his cot. Eye contact is more subtle, and involves looking at a person's face, making 'contact' when their eyes meet yours, then looking away when it is appropriate. Some of us look too long when we are talking, and some of us do not make eye contact at all.

Knowing what is right comes from early and repeated experience. As Sioban put it: 'Faces tell us everything we need to know, and children will need to look at faces many thousands of times before they start school, to gain essential information about what is being said.'

Interpreting faces

Here is Ibrahim again, at nine-months-old. Much of his understanding of language, and how he communicates, comes during elaborate face-to-face play sessions with his parents, grandparents and older brother and sister. Mum and Dad know what makes Ibrahim laugh, and make sure that if he laughs at something, a funny face they pull or a silly noise they



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make with their mouths, that they repeat these actions and sounds over and over again.

Mum and Dad also respond when he falls over, or is grumpy or tired, by using exaggerated sad faces and tone of voice, followed by smiles, hugs and happy voices to try and help cheer him up. This helps Ibrahim link facial expression, tone of voice and emotions. Ibrahim has been using facial expressions from birth. They were originally automatic, but as his understanding of faces grew, he began to use frowns, shaking his head to mean 'no', and smiling and opening his eyes wide to mean, 'yes please, that banana is exactly what I want'. Once Ibrahim starts to talk, then his parents will automatically ease off on their exaggerated non-verbal play, as conversations using words take over.

The importance of mealtimes

Sioban Boyce impressed on me the idea that babies particularly need to watch faces when other people are talking, not just talking to the baby, but having conversations with each other. Sioban feels that family mealtimes are essential for the development of young children's non-verbal communication, and for the growth of their language. I am inclined to agree.

Children learn a huge amount of language, and about how to use language socially, by observing conversations at mealtimes. A baby will watch people looking at each other – reaching and passing; offering; refusing politely; being offered again; refusing more firmly; giving in; discussing; agreeing; disagreeing; being quiet and watching; being told off; being praised; spilling things and the effect this has; clearing away; bringing; being pleased; being disappointed; being bored; asking questions. The list goes on and on, and

the experience is just what young children need. At first, all the language will wash over them, but the words will gradually start to make sense. Mealtimes are rituals, with language that is repetitive and predictable, so the more children can be involved in mealtimes with adults and other children, the more language will make sense.

But this is not going to happen if children regularly eat on their own, or in front of the television. We hear that, in the UK at least, family meals where people talk to each other are not as common as they used to be. This means that children are missing out on important opportunities for linking language with non-verbal communication. We also need to consider whether it is appropriate for babies in daycare to regularly have their meals sitting in individual high chairs, as opposed to sitting together at a table.

The buggy debate

If we agree that babies and children, younger than 18-months-old, rely heavily on seeing adult faces, listening to conversations and making sense of key words by seeing what the people are talking about, then a forward-facing buggy is probably the worst place for a baby or toddler to be.

If his dad stops for a chat, then baby may be able to hear voices but will not see the faces. Babies are very low down in buggies, so if dad needs to talk to baby about something, he will need to lean over from behind. Baby will need to turn round and crane his neck before he can start to make sense of what is being said to him.

Really and truly, the best alternative for increasing a baby and toddler's understanding of non-verbal communication and language while they are out and



At home: Non-verbal communication is the foundation of language development

about would be to be pushed in an old-fashioned pram, or a buggy that faces towards the adult pushing it. The return to the former is just not going to happen (try getting a pram on a bus or train) and the latter option is, at the time of writing, hugely expensive. Forward-facing buggies, on the other hand, are relatively cheap and light; you can get them on the bus or train and hang your shopping on them.

However, some children spend a great deal of time in buggies – sleeping, waiting and being pushed down the street. Parents can do their best to support their child's developing language when he is sitting in a forward-facing buggy by talking to him about what is coming along the street and other things that they can both see together.

If, like Ibrahim, children are involved in a great deal of interaction, and take part in rich experiences that include talking, then sitting in a forward-facing buggy will be a necessary hardship, but not one that will impair his language development. However, if children do not take part in playful interactions, or have few opportunities to observe facial expressions, tone of voice and gesture, then it is likely that sitting for long periods of time in a forward-facing buggy will combine with other factors to lead to children becoming confused and losing interest in what people are saying.

Developing children's non-verbal skills early in life provides an essential foundation for understanding language, as well as being able to use these skills automatically when talking with adults and other

children. Being able to interpret and use appropriate facial expressions are essential skills for effective communication in school and as an adult. This allows us to get vital clues about how to behave – for example, when to interrupt, when we have talked too much, and even whether you can trust someone, because facial expression and tone of voice tell us whether someone is telling the truth, joking or even lying.

Confident talkers use non-verbal skills automatically, while those who feel uncomfortable about talking to other people often need support to become aware of these skills and to use them appropriately.

Practitioners need to be aware of the importance of developing these skills through play and everyday activities. What we have outlined above reinforces the importance of adult involvement in mealtimes within the setting – as opportunities for developing the foundations of communication, as well as for encouraging talk. Practitioners can continue to interact positively with babies in the same way that the babies do with their parents at home. They can support parents who are not making full use of non-verbal communication by modelling interactions that show how baby responds positively.

When working with children who experience communication difficulties, including those caused by hearing impairment, developmental delay or environmental difficulties, such as lack of experience, we will naturally focus on improving children's verbal understanding and expression. However, we also need to develop children's understanding of facial expressions and tone of voice. With older children it will not be appropriate to get up as close as we do with babies, but we can exaggerate our tone of voice and emotions naturally, when sharing story books and in role-play. This helps children link facial expression with tone of voice and words in an understandable context.

And what happened to Ibrahim? Well he is still a smiley little boy, and now that he fully understands facial expressions, is confident when talking with adults and children, understands jokes, and is even beginning to tell his own. He smiles back when adults smile at him, which makes them feel comfortable and immediately leads to Ibrahim being involved in interesting conversations. eye

Useful resources

- *Not Just Talking: Identifying Non-Verbal Communication Difficulties – A life-changing approach* by Sioban Boyce. Published by Speechmark (ISBN: 9780863888496).
- For information about the work of Sioban Boyce, visit www.notjusttalking.co.uk
- For more information about children's communication visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk
- Professor Colwyn Trevarthen and other experts in the field of early years can be seen discussing their ideas at www.educationscotland.gov.uk/earlyyears/prebirthtothree/nationalguidance/conversations/colwyntrevarthen.asp

Key points

- The development of highly sophisticated reading and use of facial expression begins at birth and continues throughout life
- Depending on what we read, we are told that 'body language' accounts for between 70 percent and 90 percent of communication
- Non-verbal communication is the 'cake' and words are the icing on that cake
- Understanding of facial expression, tone of voice and gesture is crucial for the wellbeing of very young children, their development of language, and how they grow to use language socially