Children benefit enormously language-wise when practitioners and parents dedicate time to meaningful interaction, says Michael Jones

**In the moment**

Engaging in meaningful interaction and conversation is central to children’s language learning. For young children, the most meaningful communication involves adults commenting on what children are doing and responding to their comments and questions, particularly with those who are quiet. Many shy children in the early stages of learning English as an additional language are equally vulnerable when we work within a ratio of one adult to 13 children. For more information, email: childcare@hants.gov.uk

**QUALITY OF INTERACTION**

I occasionally lead training for practitioners in Hampshire County Council’s Let’s Talk Together project, a continuation of ECGT and other projects for language development. However, Positive Interaction directly addresses the fundamental question that is asked by staff in nursery and reception classes in particular; that is, ‘How can we become more responsive when we work within a ratio of one adult to 13 children?’

The answer is the concept of ‘the planted adult’.

**THE PLANTED ADULT**

What this means is that an adult plans to stay with children in one particular place for a given amount of time. As Bhavna describes it, ‘A planted adult looks like she is relaxed and interested in what the children are doing, and is going to stay put and be totally “in the moment” with the child or children with whom she is interacting. She has agreed with other adults that she will not be responsible for anything else, as these duties will be taken up by other colleagues.

A planted adult who is using Positive Interaction techniques such as observing, waiting, listening and responding will be able to draw children into conversation and keep the talk going in the sustained way that we know is vital for learning and well-being. We are not setting up special activities for children, but getting involved with their own interests.

This approach is particularly important for children who are unsure of how to interact, and such sessions are often the catalyst for them to move forward in their confidence to talk with adults and the other children.

Debbie and I put Positive Interaction into practice during a day of outdoor play activities for the nursery class at Bedfont Primary School in Feltham. The staff had asked me to develop outdoor play and language, and we based this on using stones, water, sand, shovels and pipes. Because these activities were naturally attractive, most of the children were outside. As a result, the majority of staff could be with them.

I spent time around and supervise how children were involved with resources, including understanding how to use the shovels, and helping children to share and take turns. This freed colleagues to become involved totally with children’s play and talk, without needing to divert their attention towards ‘tours’.

Our photograph (left) illustrates perfectly how ‘being in the moment’ as a planted adult can work. Debbie could see that the children were interested in shoveling different sizes of stones down the drainpipe and into the builder’s tray, though weren’t sure how to organise themselves to make it happen. Debbie was able to support the children to talk and play together at this activity for at least 20 minutes. During this time, various children, many of whom were learning English as an additional language, or who had not ordinarily become involved in this type of activity, were able to spend time in deep concentration – with Debbie and each other.

Debbie was equally able to concentrate on what the children were doing, while using comments to extend their involvement, which in turn encouraged the children to make comments of their own. For example, we can see Debbie commenting, ‘That’s a massive pebble! Ooh, there it goes!’ This invited the little boy to respond positively.

**MORE INFORMATION**

- A ‘Keep on Talking’ handbook is produced by the Children’s Services Department, Hampshire County Council. For more information, email: childcare@hants.gov.uk
- Jones, M., Belsten, J (2011) Let’s Get Talking! Exciting ways to support children with speech and language difficulties, Lawrence Educational
- For more information about our Positive Interaction training and London Borough of Hounslow’s Let’s Talk Together project, email: bhavna.acharya@hrch.nhs.uk

**The planted adult:** Debbie Brace devotes time – ‘being in the moment’ – to interacting with children, who respond positively.