



Jaleel shows that he knows how to push the telephone's buttons and hold it up to his ear, as he has seen other people doing. He offers it to

Steven, who shares in the imaginary conversation with Jaleel's absent mother before they both say goodbye and wave their hands.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Who's calling?

A pretend telephone communication can demonstrate a very young child's grasp of speaking languages, imitating adult reality and being held in mind, as *Anne O'Connor* explains

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Jaleel is 16 months old. Both French and English are spoken in his family. He and Steven, an early years practitioner, are sitting together playing games and singing songs. Jaleel wanders off and picks up a pretend mobile phone. He pushes the buttons and puts the phone to his ear.

He walks back over to Steven, who asks him if he's on the phone to his mam. Jaleel puts the phone to Steven's ear and Steven pretends to talk to Jaleel's mother. To finish the conversation, Steven says 'bye bye' and waves. As he repeats the words and gestures, Jaleel copies him, saying 'ba bye', and waving back. Jaleel then wanders off, saying 'ba-bye' with the phone to his ear.

**Making connections with previous experience is an important part of early learning. Jaleel has had lots of experience of people talking on the phone. He knows how the buttons**

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

The stills are taken from Siren Films 'Firm Foundations For Literacy 0-5'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilms.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

**are pushed and knows that you hold it to your ear while talking and listening.**

Exploring the pretend phone helps to consolidate the experience and allows him to behave 'as if' he is making a real phone call. The presence of an interested adult close by who is ready to build on this event, reaffirming and extending Jaleel's interest, makes the experience more powerful.

Jaleel responds comfortably to Steven's interaction and allows him to join in the play. He keeps hold of the phone, but puts it to Steven's ear for him to talk, exactly in the way that adults often do to include children in a phone call.

Jaleel is telling us that he is beginning to appreciate what it means 'to pretend'. Whether or not the phone is a 'real' one, he and Steven are 'pretending' to have a phone conversation with Jaleel's mother. The look of involvement on Jaleel's face shows that he is completely engaged with the game and doesn't need there to

be someone on the other end of the phone line to want to pursue the activity.

**2 Here Jaleel is the one in charge of the phone, but it is Steven's interactions that extend the role play, reinforcing Jaleel's understanding of language and gesture.**

Conversations with interested adults are fundamental to children's language acquisition. There are many theories about why and how human babies learn to talk. To read them, you wonder how any of us ever managed to develop such a complicated and difficult skill – and at a young age too!

One thing we can be certain of is that our urge to communicate is linked to every aspect of our well-being and that it is essential to our cognitive development. Jaleel isn't just imitating and repeating words and gestures. His interest in the

phone, the way he uses it and his interactions with Steven give us lots of information about how well his thinking skills are developing.

**3 Language enables us to think symbolically. This means that words can be used to stand for people and objects even when they are not around and visible to us.**

Jaleel cannot see his mam, but has a whole wealth of association and thought that is linked to that word when he hears it. He understands the meaning of the word 'bye-bye' and is just beginning to use it confidently. Like most babies, he is very familiar with the waving gesture that signals goodbye and was probably using that before he attempted the word.

Across the world, whatever their language, babies generally tend to start using words slowly. They build a vocabulary one word at a time to begin with, linking their utterances to specific people or things. At first, these might be only recognisable to parents or carers who know the child well and recognise the intention behind the sound.

The sounds are personal to the baby and when used consistently, signal either an interest in something or a request. Although most babies begin to say their first words between 12 and 18 months, the breakthrough from sounds into recognisable words is very personal and can vary enormously from child to child. It is really important, then, that children spending time outside of the home and

away from their families are cared for by consistent, attentive adults who are there to recognise and celebrate these significant milestones.

**4 In playing this game with Steven, Jaleel also has the opportunity to revisit in his second language, a familiar experience from home.**

This helps him to construct meaning to the words Steven is using. For an emerging bilingual child like Jaleel, active learning through self-initiated play, in the company of an interested adult, provides the best way to develop confidence in either of his languages.

**5 By responding as he does, Steven is also providing Jaleel with another very important link to his home. He is helping Jaleel to 'keep in mind' his mother while he is away from her.**

Not only is this comforting and reassuring for Jaleel, it is also helping to reinforce the bond with his mam – his primary attachment figure. Just as importantly, it helps remind Jaleel that his mam will also be 'holding him in mind' while she is away from him.

**6 Pretend play with phones is a great way to encourage conversational talk with all children. It can be particularly**

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**

- Jennie Lindon, *Understanding Child Development: Linking Theory and Practice* (Hodder Arnold)
- Marian R Whitehead, *Developing Language and Literacy with Young Children* (Paul Chapman)
- 'Being Held in Another's Mind' by Jeree Pawl, [www.wested.org/online\\_pubs/ccfs-06-01-chapter1.pdf](http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/ccfs-06-01-chapter1.pdf)
- [www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/warning-using-a-mobile-phone-while-pregnant-can-seriously-damage-your-baby-830352.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/warning-using-a-mobile-phone-while-pregnant-can-seriously-damage-your-baby-830352.html)

**useful for helping reluctant talkers to find their voice.**

Although toy phones (with ring tones and other sound technology) are widely available, old defunct phones are probably always going to be the most attractive to children. Even though corded phones might seem a historical oddity to some, children still seem to understand how to use them. A row of phones in an independent writing area easily creates a variety of different role play scenarios, such as an office, or a takeaway restaurant, and menus and writing materials encourage writing for a purpose.

Before letting a child play with a disused phone, take care that pull-out aerials and loose batteries have all been removed. It is also worth remembering that there are still some health concerns around the use of mobile and digital phones, particularly when used around young children.

It may be that future research will show some serious health risks. Until there is strong evidence that mobile phones and other wireless devices are not harmful, it might be wise to limit their use around young children and to remind parents of the possible risks. ■



**LINKS TO THE EYFS GUIDANCE**

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 3.2** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.2** Supporting Every Child
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration