



Baby Orson enjoys playing with his father and brother, until Seb appears hurt from banging his face against the guitar and dad stops smiling.

Orson studies his father's concerned expression and looks back at his brother to see what prompts him to respond this way.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Reference points

Adults' facial expressions have a strong impact on very young children learning about social relationships. *Anne O'Connor* explains social referencing and why early years workers need to understand it

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Orson and his brother Seb are playing happily with dad. The mood changes when Seb bangs his face on the guitar. Orson looks carefully at dad and registers that he is no longer smiling and relaxed, and is showing concern for Seb in his expression and the way he is talking to him.

Orson turns back to his brother and copies dad's concerned expression. Dad's response to Seb's mishap provides Orson with information about how people handle distress and show their concern and empathy for each other. This not only helps Orson build a bigger picture of how relationships work, but gives him the specific information he needs to guide his own responses.

When babies look towards their carers for a response to help them deal with a new experience, they need the adult to assess the situation and give them a

positive or negative reaction, so that they know how to proceed.

This process is called 'social referencing' and is linked with a baby's growing abilities to share 'joint attention' and to 'read' facial expressions. Once a baby has reached this stage of development, they are highly likely to copy the adult responses that they see in their faces.

- It might, for example, be about safety – is it ok to pick up this plate, to crawl out the door or to pat this dog?
- Or it could also be about emotions – Does mum like this person, is dad scared of the wasp, are they worried about my brother?

2 A famous piece of research (Sorce et al, 1983) showed just how influential the facial expression of a parent is in encouraging a child to attempt a new experience.

In the experiment, one-year-old babies were presented with what would seem to them to be a confusing and frightening situation – a 'visual cliff' with what appeared to be a drop on one side.

Mothers were asked to provide different facial cues as the babies moved towards the pretend cliff. This showed the researchers the impact that the mothers' facial expressions had on their babies' attempts to try to cross.

The researchers found that the babies' behaviour was directly affect-

ed by the expression they saw on their mother's face.

Anger and fear proved to have the biggest impact, as angry or fearful expressions on the mother's face resulted in very few babies attempting to cross.

Sad faces caused confused responses as the babies tried to make sense of the situation. Joyful, interested expressions gave most babies the confidence to cross.

In a similar experiment, mothers of one-year-old babies were asked to react in varied ways to new toys. Even if the toy was one that would have been expected to appeal to the baby, the research found that their response reliably mirrored that of their mother.

What seems to be significant is that responsive carers instinctively exaggerate their emotional reactions to things and events around babies. This high level of expressiveness (positive or negative) means the baby is more likely to notice and pay attention.

Not only does this affect the baby's reaction to things, but as they mirror the expression, the meaning of the emotion also becomes established for the baby.

3 The findings of the research by Sorce et al 1983 (see above) has lots of relevance for carers working with young children.

In the absence of their primary attachment figures, babies need to feel secure with a few trusted second-

ary carers in order to be able to build secondary attachments.

Without this attachment, they will not feel able to trust the responses of the adults to whom they look for reassurance and to make sense of new situations. This leads to anxiety and uncertainty which, as a child grows older, can lead to behaviours that might present as oppositional or non-conformative.

To assess the effectiveness of your practice, consider:

- How key carers are supported to build strong secondary attachments with their care group, so that both adult and child learn to 'tune in' to each others' facial expressions.
- The need to be aware of just how watchful young children are of our reactions, responses and judgements. An expression of disgust towards food, images or people, for example, is likely to be absorbed and mirrored by a child, whether or not it was intentional. This has particular importance when it comes to value judgements and personal prejudices such as attitudes to race, culture and gender.
- Babies and young children who are becoming skilled at social referencing will also be tuned in to our moods and emotions. Having cross, grumpy carers will affect them just as much (and maybe more) as having happy, relaxed people around them.
- Children's sensitivity to our feelings doesn't mean that we



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Robinson M (2003), *From Birth to One: The year of opportunity*. Open University Press
- Siren Films, 'Attachment in Practice' DVD and user notes
- Sally Thomas, *Nurturing Babies and Children Under Four – Achieving best practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Heinemann

FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Attachment and Holistic Development – The first year' (Observation Sequences with comprehensive user notes, latest release for 2008). For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

should hide our emotions, or walk round wearing false, jolly faces. Children learn valuable emotional lessons by watching adults express their feelings. However, we do need to be constantly aware of the powerful impact that our behaviour has on the information their brains are processing as they make sense of the world and human reactions to it.

- Just as important as our emotions is the consistency we display in our reactions. Imagine the confusion for a baby exposed to an adult's mood swings, where praise and adoration are heaped on them one minute and indifference or approbation the next.
- Research suggests that difficulties in 'reading' expressions and 'joint attention' may be linked with autistic spectrum disorders. Seek expert advice if you have concerns about a young child's developing abilities with regard to social referencing and joint attention. ■



LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- UC 1.1 Child Development
- UC 1.4 Health and Well-being
- PR 2.4 Key Person
- L&D 4.4 Learning and Development: Personal Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy