



Shammy's grandmother lays him on the bed and faces him to encourage two-way communication. As she speaks to Shammy in the family's first

language, Urdu, she uses 'parentese' with lots of repetition and exaggerated facial expressions to which he responds with smiles and gurgles

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Time to talk

Young children can acquire more than one language without detriment to learning English and will enjoy greater self-esteem if carers outside the home respect their mother tongue. *Anne O'Connor* explains why

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

بچا بول

Baccha Bol (Urdu for talking to babies)

Shammy is in the bedroom with his grandmother. She knows him well and spends lots of time talking and playing with him. She lays him on the bed so that they can have a face-to-face conversation. She speaks Urdu to him, using lots of repetition and facial expression. Shammy will grow up bilingual in Urdu and English.

The manner in which people talk to babies is universal. This special way of talking is known as 'parentese'.

Whatever the language spoken, when talking to babies, there is a tendency to use a high-pitched, sing-song voice with enhanced and elongated sounds. Facial expressions are exaggerated too, with wide eyes and big mouth movements. Words and phrases are repeated, often in the form of questions, and the carer responds as if the baby's babbles and sounds are real conversation. Even quite young children will instinctively do it with babies. So why do we do it?

- Because babies like it! Research has shown that babies are more attracted to the sound of it than they are to regular talk and conversation.
- They are also very interested in faces, and the enhanced facial expressions hold their attention.
- It helps babies learn. Their brains are 'mapping' the words and sounds they hear and the frequent repetition builds connections so that comprehension and understanding start to emerge.

- As well as learning about language and conversations, babies are also seeing themselves 'mirrored' by the carer. The way that carers wait for a response from the baby – perhaps a smile, a gurgle or excited movements – and then repeat it back to them, helps the baby to learn about themselves, as they see their actions mirrored by the adult.

- It helps parents and carers to bond with their baby. The baby not only enjoys the experience, it also helps them to feel safe and secure and to know that they are loved. At the same time, the joyous responses of the baby make the adult feel good too. The brains of both carer and baby are flooded with 'feel-good' chemicals (opioids), which reinforce the pleasure and make them both want to repeat the experience.

2 Being comfortable with two or more languages is the norm for most people in the world.

We tend to forget that even in the UK there is a historical tradition of English being spoken alongside other languages such as Welsh, Cornish, Manx and Scottish/Irish Gaelic. And yet, there persists this misguided belief that speaking another language in the home will have a detrimental effect on a child's ability to learn English.

Research not only shows us that this is not true, but indicates that for children who live their lives bilin-

gually, 'using both languages aids cognitive development and strengthens their identities as learners' (Goldsmith research, see References).

Whereas young babies respond to and are attracted to 'parentese' in any language, child development studies suggest that by nine months, babies have an understanding of the general characteristics of the languages relevant to them and become less responsive to others.

This is probably because the brain starts 'pruning' connections that are no longer required (which helps explain why some of us find later language learning so hard!). A baby being brought up in the UK will be exposed to English regardless of whether it is spoken in the home, but needs also to frequently hear their family language and have it spoken to them.

3 Supporting the home languages of babies and young children is particularly important when children are in daycare and early education settings away from their home.

The EYFS guidance requires practitioners to 'Show particular awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of children learning English as an additional language, using their home language when appropriate and ensuring close teamwork between practitioners, parents and bilingual workers, so that the children's developing use of English and other languages support each other' (EYFS card: Learning

and Development – Communication, Language and Literacy). Ways to do this include:

- Find out from parents about the languages and dialects spoken in the home.
- Reassure them that using their first language at home is extremely valuable and will not prevent the development of English – in fact, it will support it.
- Ask parents' help in learning key words that are particular to individual babies and young children – words used for greetings, farewells, mum, dad, and so on, and family words used for the toilet or to encourage children to eat – for example, 'Mniam mniam' (Polish for 'yum yum').
- Make it easy for practitioners to learn, rehearse and experiment with unfamiliar words. Be supportive of each other and sensitive to the inhibitions that many monolingual English speakers have about their language abilities. Make pocket-sized booklets of words or sets of laminated prompt cards on key rings. Put up posters in the kitchen, staffroom or loo – try a new word every week!
- With the help of families, make recordings of familiar songs, rhymes and lullabies, as well as comforting messages in home languages, that can be played to help settle or soothe the child.
- Remember, most of these strategies are good practice for all children in settings, regardless of whether or not they are bilingual!



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Maria Robinson, *From Birth to One: The year of opportunity* (Open Opportunity Press)
- Jennie Lindon, *Equality in Early Childhood* (Hodder Arnold)
- Literacy Trust, www.literacytrust.org.uk/talktoyourbaby/Whytalk.html
- 'Speaking parentese' at: www.pbs.org/parents/earlylearning/parentese.html
- 'Bilingual learning benefits second and third generation children' at: www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/news/pressrelease.php?releaseID=537

FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Born To Talk'. For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

4 Acknowledging and showing an interest in their home languages can have a profound impact on the self-esteem and confidence of children and families.

As well as providing reassurance, it validates their home experience and helps build positive feelings about their identity and place in society.

- A multilingual 'welcome' poster is only a start – promotion of bilingualism needs to go much further if it is to make a difference.
- Recognise and value the dialects, accents and languages (including signing) of your colleagues, as well as those spoken by the children and families in your setting.
- Promote an understanding of bilingualism and its benefits in your team and with monolingual parents who might see the presence of bilingual children (and the use of their first languages) in the setting as a threat to learning and social cohesion. Help them to understand that awareness of all kinds of language is a benefit to us all in our increasingly multilingual society. ■



LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.2** Inclusive Practice
- **PR 2.1** Respecting Each Other
- **PR 2.2** Parents as Partners
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **L&D 4.4** Areas of Learning and Development – Communication, language and literacy