



Orson shows surprise, then a bit of apprehension when his mother's face disappears behind a book. But he soon learns to anticipate what's next.

Repeating the peek-a-boo game, Orson's mother gives him time to respond to her reappearance, and he replies with expressions of delight.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Peek a boo!

Two-way exchanges between babies and adults help build up language and brain development. *Anne O'Connor* considers how practitioners can create more opportunities for them

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Orson and his mother are on the floor together. Playing games with Mum is fun, but when she hides behind the book, there is a moment of concern for Orson, though this soon turns to delight when Mum reappears. Mum responds by repeating the action and Orson enjoys the anticipation and excitement of what is to happen.

They repeat the game over and over, with Mum giving Orson time to initiate and respond. This turn-taking between the two of them is a form of conversation.

The experience of playing such games is not only helping the development of Orson's communication and language skills, it is also forging connections in his brain as he relates to the lovely feelings that positive interactions bring.

Babies have a natural urge to communicate and their first conversations with adults start long before they begin to talk.

Think of the close connection between an infant and the person feeding them, whether at the breast or with a bottle. When the baby stops sucking, we respond with a jiggle or a word or two until they resume sucking. This happens over and over again throughout a feed, as the responsive adult and the baby take it in turns to respond to each other.

In a similar way, babies invite conversation with us and our affectionate interactions with them involve more turn-taking, as we gaze at each other

and communicate with reciprocal movements and sounds. The intonation and sing-song rhythms we instinctively use with babies capture their interest and are vital to early language development.

Babies love to initiate games that they can lead, such as handing us things so that we will give them back. Both the baby and the caregiver not only take turns, but wait for each other's response before 'replying'. The daily repetition of such spontaneous actions throughout the day makes connections in the parts of the baby's brain that help them organise and make sense of how the world around them works.

A simple game like peek-a-boo works on many levels to stimulate a baby's brain.

Peek-a-boo is both exciting and reassuring, and some babies will want to play it over and over again. But be ready to adjust your timing sensitively – some babies can become distressed if you don't reappear soon enough, or become startled and upset by sudden or very loud 'boos'!

To extend the game, some children will enjoy hiding themselves under blankets. Others might need the reassurance of fabrics they can see through, such as voile or chiffon.

Discovering that things still exist even if we can't see them is an important feature of the learning that takes place when babies play.

Think how much they enjoy dropping things for others to pick up, or putting them in and out of containers. Jack-in-a-boxes and other pop-up or hideaway toys also provoke anticipation and surprise.

3 Make the most of opportunities to engage babies and young children in reciprocal play and conversations, verbal and non-verbal.

- Be ready to respond when they initiate talk and take the lead in games.
- Daily care routines are a perfect time for games and affectionate chatter.
- Body language, facial expression, gestures and hand movements are all important ways of conversing.
- Give plenty of time for responses and don't be in a rush to move on the conversation or game. Pause and leave gaps in conversations so that children have plenty of time to think and formulate their responses.
- Listen to yourself in conversations or play with children. Are you always talking? Do you ask too many questions? How do you show children you are really listening to them?
- Think about how you engage children in conversations. Are you down on their level, or talking to them from above? Although making eye contact is important, it is not always essential, so be sensitive to babies and young children who may need space to look

away from time to time.

- Don't rush to converse with children who don't know you well. Sit close by, in a relaxed and open way, and wait for them to take the lead.
- Research tells us that all languages and cultures use the affectionate, sing-song 'motherese' style of talk, so there is no need to hold back with babies and children whose first language is not English. Even better, ask parents to teach you the words their toddler is using and learn along with them!

4 Consider how the nursery environment and resources can promote, or impede, children's talk.

- Noisy environments can make conversation difficult and don't help babies to differentiate between sounds and voices. Have quiet spaces both indoors and out, where hushed and gentle conversations can take place as well as opportunities for loud, excitable chatter.
- Mirrors are great for babies and young children to have conversations with themselves and to explore how lip and mouth movements correspond with speech and sounds.
- Phones and microphones of all kinds will always be excellent tools for promoting talk, along with 'recording' toys (such as teddies and parrots) that repeat voice messages.
- Make recordings of babies babbling

FURTHER INFORMATION

● The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'The Wonder Year – First year development and shaping the brain'. For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

and young children chatting, to share with parents who may be anxious that they are missing out on language milestones and first words.

- Think how you encourage children to have conversations with each other. Babies fed in high chairs facing each other will chatter happily in a way that is less likely if they are stuck in a row.
- Where possible, use 'pusher-facing' prams and pushchairs that allow you to talk to babies when out. Help parents to see the value of them too. ■



LINKS TO THE EYFS

- **UC 1.2** Inclusive Practice
- **PR 2.3** Supporting learning
- **L&D 4.3** Creativity and critical thinking

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Maria Robinson, *From Birth to One – The year of opportunity*. OUP
- Di Chilvers, *Young Children Talking*. Early Education (BAECE)
- Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR356.pdf
- National Literacy Trust 'Talk to Your Baby' campaign, www.literacytrust.org.uk/talktoyourbaby/
- *Nursery World* series on children's thinking: Part 1 (21 February 2008), Part 2 (to be published on 21 March)