



Bobby catches her mother's eye when they are out with the buggy. Her mother points out the rocking horse outside the shop and smiles at her.

When they bump into someone her mother knows, Bobby watches her mother's smiling and talking and tries to mirror her expressions.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Face to face

The importance of reciprocal expressions between a baby and an adult carer, and finding opportunities that enable it, are explored by **Anne O'Connor**

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Close interactions and the affectionate gaze between parent and child help shape a baby's brain. But just as importantly, an essential part of Bobby's brain is being built and developed through the positive experiences of face-to-face contact as she and her mother gaze happily at each other.

Bobby (seven months) and her mother are going for a walk down the high street. Bobby is in her buggy facing towards her mother, who smiles and talks to her as they walk along. When her mother stops to chat to someone, Bobby watches her face intently and mirrors her expressions as her mother smiles and laughs as she talks. She draws Bobby's attention

to things that she thinks will interest her, like the rocking horse outside the shop, and positions the pram so that Bobby can see it. Bobby shifts her gaze to look at the horse and back again to watch her mother's face.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Bobby's mother knows that a trip to the shops is full of sights and sounds and events that are interesting and stimulating to a young baby, no matter how familiar and everyday they might seem.**

She also knows that Bobby needs her help to interpret and make sense



**FURTHER INFORMATION**

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Babies Outdoors: Play, learning and development'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilm.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilm.co.uk) or call: 0191 232 7900

of what she sees and hears as she builds up her knowledge and experience of the world around her.

Early positive experiences like a trip to the shops are so important for a baby's brain development. As Sue Gerhardt writes in *Why Love Matters – How affection shapes a baby's brain* (page 39), 'When the relationship is dominated by pleasurable interactions, the parent and the baby are, without realising it, building up the baby's pre-frontal cortex and developing his capacities for self-regulation and complex social interactions.'

Bobby is using her senses to absorb the sights and sounds of her wider world out on the high street, and her mother helps her to make sense of them, by commenting and interpreting them for her. But just as importantly, an essential part of Bobby's brain is being built and developed through the positive experiences of face-to-face contact as she and her mother gaze happily at each other in a reciprocal way.

**2 Reciprocity – a social exchange that is mutually beneficial – is highly important in early parent-child relationships.**

In her seven months of life, Bobby has become an expert on her mother's face and the sound of her voice. She has had many positive experiences of her using her voice and facial expression to soothe and comfort as well as entertaining and stimulating her. She also knows that her mother is now an

expert on Bobby's own facial expressions and body language, as well as the sounds and gestures she makes. Bobby has had enough positive experiences to know that she can indicate a need to her mother, who will respond, more often than not, with exactly what is required.

Maria Robinson describes the importance of a 'loving look' in *From Birth to One – The year of opportunity* (page 128) and the sad fact that 'babies who are "not seen" in this way may already be turning off their ability to interact with others – unless there are other adults who may be able to provide the missing experience.'

As practitioners, we must not forget the value of the face-to-face communication that we have with the babies and young children in our care, and the importance of building those reciprocal relationships.

**3 When her mother stops to chat, Bobby focuses intently on her facial expressions and seems to mirror them.**

Imitating facial expression is something babies begin to do almost from birth, when they can be observed copying an open mouth and a protruding tongue. Mirroring facial expression in this way is another important feature of brain development and is something that intrigues researchers.

Studies are beginning to show that some kind of 'mirror system' seems to exist in the brain that becomes activated when we observe an action, in

just the same way as if we had experienced the action ourselves. In her most recent book, *Understanding Behaviour and Development in Early Childhood*, Maria Robinson explores this research and concludes that imitation is part of the 'repertoire' that infants have in order to develop 'communication pathways' between baby and parent (page 51).

**4 Bobby and her mother share 'joint attention' when they look at the rocking horse out in the street.**

Bobby's mother makes sure that her baby can see it as she points it out to her. Bobby shifts her gaze from her face to the horse and back again. Both mother and Bobby are focusing attention on the same thing. This is an important stage in a baby's development as they become capable of identifying what someone else is looking at and shifting their own gaze as a consequence.

Bobby not only knows that she is looking at the horse – she knows that her mother is looking at it too! She is developing a recognition that she and mum can share the same world view. This is an important feature of the development of self-identity and a baby's awareness of themselves as an individual. As Maria Robinson describes it, there is a wonderful sense of 'I can look, you can look, we can look – what joy!' (*Understanding Behaviour and Development in Early Childhood*, page 64).

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**

- Robinson, M (2003) *From Birth to One – The year of opportunity*, OUP
- Robinson, M (2010) *Understanding Behaviour and Development in Early Childhood – A guide to theory and practice*, Routledge
- Gerhardt, Sue (2004) *Why Love Matters – How affection shapes a baby's brain*, Routledge
- Talk to Your Baby, [www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk\\_to\\_your\\_baby](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby)
- Talk to Your Baby research, [www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk\\_to\\_your\\_baby/resources/1555\\_whats\\_life\\_in\\_a\\_baby\\_buggy\\_like](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/resources/1555_whats_life_in_a_baby_buggy_like)
- Norland College video, [www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/videos/1859\\_norland\\_college\\_forward-facing\\_buggy\\_ride](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/videos/1859_norland_college_forward-facing_buggy_ride)

**5 All of this powerful interaction can take place because Bobby is in a 'pusher-facing' buggy – she and her mother are face to face as they go out and about.**

The National Literacy Trust's Talk to Your Baby campaign has successfully highlighted the impact of buggy design on the interactions between a parent and their baby. Their research 'What's life in a baby buggy like?' drew attention to the lack of reassuring eye-contact and the difficulties of communicating with babies in forward-facing pushchairs.

Similarly, a video produced by Norland College showing a child's eye view from a forward-facing buggy highlighted the potential stressfulness of the experience if on a daily basis.

At a time of growing concern about speech and language development and a raised awareness of the impact of stress on developing brains, this research has at the very least challenged manufacturers to design buggies that can continue to remain pusher-facing for longer than the first few months. Bobby and her mother will no doubt continue to have lots of joyful, stimulating conversations. ■



**LINKS TO THE EYFS**

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 2.2** Parents as Partners
- **EE** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration