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# Developing an Appreciation of Babies' and Young Children's Behaviour – Why Do They Do What They Do?

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## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES



This chapter discusses:

- Babies' and young children's sophisticated communication abilities.
- Effective communication being dependent upon sending and receiving messages in a known social context.
- Proficiency in how we interpret, and respond to, a baby's signals affecting their development and future behaviour.
- Allowing young children opportunities for taking control.

Behaviour is the result of interaction with others and the environment and relies on effective communication to be socially acceptable. Interpreting the messages between baby and carer is fundamental to the developing relationship and, since both baby and carer are new to the relationship, they have to learn from each other. But as well as learning from the children in our care we need to remind ourselves to enjoy their company and share their obvious pleasure in their growing accomplishments.



### Case Study

Grace, a 6-week-old baby, was being bottle-fed by Zara, an adult. After a while Grace turned her head away and Zara continued to try and feed her. Grace turned her head away again and gave a little cry. Zara tried again to encourage Grace to take more feed, but Grace turned her head away from the teat again, cried and arched her back. Zara persisted in trying to encourage Grace to take more feed, but Grace continued to cry. As Zara persisted Grace's cries increased and she closed her eyes, turned her head away and squirmed in Zara's arms. Zara jiggled her up and down and Grace's cries decreased and with her eyes still closed she accepted the teat in her mouth, sucked on it a couple of times and then fell into a shallow sleep. Zara moved the bottle away from Grace's mouth and, holding her more upright, she gently patted her back to encourage the release of any trapped air in Grace's stomach. Grace opened her eyes briefly then closed them again.

Grace was able to indicate that she had had sufficient milk and did not want any more. She first showed this when she turned her head away. As Zara persisted in offering her more milk Grace indicated her desire to stop more strongly, by crying. When Zara continued to offer her milk Grace closed her eyes to cut out further stimulation. Eventually when all other endeavours failed she fell into a shallow sleep. Young babies will demonstrate this early communication capability to show when they do not want a stimulus to continue. The nature of the stimulus may be physical, emotional, social or cognitive and their cue to stop may be misinterpreted by a carer who unintentionally responds in direct opposition, trying to increase the stimulation in response to the baby's cry. Usually, however, a baby gets their message across and the carer will stop whatever they are doing, try something else and may lay the baby down for a rest.

During the first few weeks parents and carers can only guess why a baby is behaving in a particular way until the baby develops more focused expressions and they have more cues to help them guess fairly accurately what the baby is signalling. The most well-known behaviour is crying with the most common cause being hunger. But babies may cry if they are feeling uncomfortable in some other way, such as in pain, or suffering from extremes of temperature. Very young babies appear to like quite warm ambient temperatures, warmer than most adults find comfortable. With many places being centrally heated nowadays a baby may get too hot during the day but they are more likely to feel too cold at night. Most young babies cry when they are undressed, in particular when the item next to their skin is removed. They will cry even if they are warm and it is probably more the feeling of exposure that upsets them. Some babies may cry if they have a dirty or wet nappy, but this is unusual and more commonly it is the comfort from contact with their carer or even from a change in position that stops their crying rather than the clean nappy. However, it is important to remember that keeping a baby clean and dry is part of providing for their well-being, showing them respect and helping them develop self-respect.

Sometimes a baby will cry and there appears to be no specific reason and this can be upsetting for their parents or main carers as they try one thing after another in an attempt to discover the

baby's needs. One of the most distressing of these occasions is when the baby suffers from what is commonly regarded as colic. In the past this was considered to be a digestive problem, possibly trapped air in the digestive tract, but it is still not clear why babies scream in this distressing way, drawing up their knees and giving all indication of being in acute pain. These spasmodic attacks usually occur after the evening feed and the baby can only be pacified momentarily before screaming again. This distressing behaviour is usually over by the time a baby reaches 3–4 months. Overstimulation is a less well-known reason for a baby's cry, and from a very early age a baby can indicate when they wish to stop an activity, as Grace did to show she had finished feeding. But it is generally more difficult to detect when young children are overstimulated than understimulated. Attending group sessions at too young an age, for example, can be over stimulating for young infants with too much confusion of noise and activity.

### GROUP TASK



- Look closely at your work environment. Is it designed more for stimulation or relaxation? Does everything serve a purpose? Is there anything you would change?
- Observe young children in play situations to detect any signs of overstimulation. Pay particular attention to the environment and the interactions. Exchange your experiences with colleagues who have observed different age groups to cover the age ranges of 0–3 months, 3–9 months, 9–12 months, 1–2 years and 2–3 years.

### DISCUSSION POINT

Should environments be designed especially for young children? Do we have the same standards of quality in environments for children as we do for adults? Is this important?

Human infants are born with a drive to learn and their behaviour is a manifestation of this intrinsic motivation as they strive to discover and understand the world around them. We want to understand this behaviour so that we can support their development. To do this we need to learn from them as well as expecting them to learn from us. We are more experienced communicators and so we are in a better position to interpret their cues and respond accordingly, but it is easier for us to consider the world through the adult mind, as opposed to the child's, because they use speech to communicate, and we can make educated guesses since we have more recent personal experience from an adult perspective. Nevertheless, even if the person is articulate it does not necessarily mean they can tell us what they were really thinking, or that we can comprehend their behaviour in relation to their thoughts, as we all have our own reality of the world. We can all relate incidents when

we have been misunderstood ourselves or when we have misinterpreted the thoughts of others. If it is this difficult to understand why adults behave in the way that they do, we can appreciate the difficulties of effective communication between baby and carer when both are learning a new system. The only way to become competent in the system is to observe, practise and act on feedback received.

Babies and children learn by observing us, practising their new skill and adapting their behaviour in accordance with the feedback they receive from others and their environment. In turn we also observe the children in our care and use this not only to discover their interests and to be familiar with their capabilities but to help us understand the individual child and why they behave in particular ways. When we watch babies play we take a lot of their behaviour for granted and just accept that is what babies do. But if we consider the significance of their actions we can appreciate why they behave in the way they do and we are in a better position to respond appropriately to provide positive and satisfying learning experiences. Although there are cultural differences in how we respond to babies' cries, a general worldwide basic pattern of comfort is, first, we talk to them, then we touch them and then we pick them up. A baby learns that when they cry someone responds. The more synchronized the interactions between the carer and the baby, the more a positive relationship is formed. If a baby's cue for initiating play is interpreted accurately and the carer plays with the baby until they correctly interpret another cue from the baby indicating they wish to stop the activity, then the carer and baby are synchronized in their interactions.

Just as communication does not depend totally on the spoken language, a baby does not rely only on crying to communicate. We use parts of our body to express our feelings and although much of this is conveyed through facial expressions, such as an upward-turned mouth in smiling to show happiness or downward-turned mouth in pouting to show unhappiness, our moods can be interpreted from other body gestures. Some of this we learn by copying the behaviour of others and some we develop as unconscious expressions of our feelings, such as holding our body in a state of tension through muscle tone if we are under stress. Through watching others we observe the different behaviour and learn to interpret the signs of body language. Again, some of this we acquire consciously and some unconsciously; for example, in a crowded street we rarely bump into another person because we send out and receive signals of our intended movements, but we are unaware that we do this. When we do collide with someone it is usually because we have been distracted and not sent or received an appropriate signal, or for some reason after sending an unconscious signal of our intended line of travel we suddenly change direction, such as when we stop to look at something which has caught our eye, or see someone we know. Newborn babies show a preference for human faces to other sights, and they are capable of copying a simple facial movement such as sticking out the tongue from the mouth if they are held in a common nursing position, so that their face is approximately 20 to 30 centimetres away from another person's face. This is sophisticated behaviour for someone who has never seen a face before, and certainly not seen their own face and will probably not do so for a number of weeks. When we consider speech and gesture as two main elements of communication, we can appreciate the significance of crying and a baby's ability to copy facial expressions as the earliest signs of a baby's communication capability, and these can be expressed within minutes of birth.

**GROUP TASK**

- Go into a crowded area and watch how people manage to avoid each other without giving any apparent signals. Notice what happens to cause the system to break down.

On the rare occasion that a baby's signals are persistently ignored, or misinterpreted, by their main carer, a breakdown in the relationship occurs; for example, if a baby's cry is constantly ignored they will eventually stop trying to communicate in this way and as early as 3 months will cease to cry because of the lack of response. This is a tragic example of the power of reinforcement, and how an infant's behaviour changes as a result of feedback from others and their environment. Reinforcement generally refers to the use of an event or action that strengthens or supports a particular behaviour that increases the likelihood of the behaviour being repeated, in other words something that serves as a reward. Praise can be used as reinforcement.

One of the most powerful ways to keep a behaviour going is through intermittent reinforcement, that is sometimes reinforcing behaviour and other times not. Thus, parents and carers demonstrating intermittent response to a behaviour, for example, sometimes responding to baby's cries and other times not, can result in the baby crying more frequently and being more difficult to soothe. The result of a parent or carer demonstrating intermittent response is particularly noticeable in response to an infant's or toddler's unsociable behaviour. We have all seen toddlers demanding something, such as sweets when at the shops, or for a particular toy in someone else's possession. If sometimes they get what they want in response to their demands, and sometimes they do not, their unsociable behaviour is likely to be repeated as the response to their behaviour is inconsistent. In contrast, if a toddler's unsociable behaviour is met with a consistent response of not meeting their demands, such as no sweets if demanded or having to wait their turn for a toy, the behaviour is not reinforced as the child learns there is no reward and they are less likely to continue to repeat the behaviour. The child who receives the reward sometimes but not always will continue with their demands because they are not sure if this time it will pay off, and so their unsociable behaviour is prolonged and can escalate into a full-blown tantrum. If a child's demands are always met this will also have the effect of reinforcing the unsociable behaviour and it will be repeated, but it is more likely to be short-lived and not end in a tantrum since they get their reward fairly quickly.

**GROUP TASK**

- Observe occasions that demonstrate intermittent responses to a young child's behaviour. The child can be any age. Note in particular the cause and consequence and why you consider it an intermittent response.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

Describe what you saw to others and discuss whether you agree it is an example of an intermittent response. Discuss how you consider the situation was handled and what the consequences would have been if the situation had been managed differently.

Individual variations in characteristics and development, and differences in social cultures make it difficult to identify what may be considered appropriate behaviour, but in most cultures there is usually a very fine line between what is considered socially acceptable behaviour and unsociable behaviour. Every culture has its own subculture; for example, the culture within every home is a subculture of the wider family, each having its own accepted modes of behaviour. As a child develops he or she becomes part of an increasing variety of subcultures, again each with its own principles for acceptable behaviour. The majority of these principles are generally compatible with the home environment as parents or main carers select experiences for their young children that they consider have comparable values for behaviour. But there will always be inconsistencies; for example, in the home environment a toddler may be encouraged to help tidy toys away after playing with them, but when visiting relatives this may not be expected and the toys are left on the floor and tidied away after the child has left. When the toddler is introduced into a new setting the rules may follow the rules at home or the rules at relatives' or may be different yet again, such as adults tidying the toys away while the toddler watches. There are even inconsistencies within each environment, such as paper being provided for drawing on, or notebooks for drawing in, but from the child's perspective there is no difference between this paper and any other, such as important documents. This becomes even more confusing and blatantly hypocritical in some instances when we insist on children telling the truth but then expect them to lie for the sake of a social nicety, that is, appearing grateful for a present that they neither like nor want. Both instances rely on detailed social knowledge and experience to help us deal with the ambiguity. A young child has to learn that some paper can be used for drawing and not others, but there is no universal rule to follow, and even with our considerable years of experience in knowing which paper is usually considered appropriate for drawing or writing on we still rely on our language to help us clarify such situations, asking, 'Can I write on this?' The second example demonstrates the complexity of the situation as each circumstance has its convoluted rules and has to be assessed individually. It may be socially acceptable for a young child to tell someone they do not like their cat because it scratches them, but they may not be able to say that they do not like their cat because it smells.

These social nuances create obstacles to appreciating young children's behaviour, and parents and carers can feel pressurized about what others think of their parenting or caring skills and this can be confused with that of the child's behaviour. A child's progress in becoming an individual can be hampered and, on occasion, it can become almost impossible for them to deviate from the role they have unintentionally been allocated. Many of us have experienced a parent's comments on the differences between a child's behaviour at home and the group setting. Such discrepancies become more apparent the older a child becomes, to the extent that

when a child attends a pre-school group or school they can appear to be a completely different child. A common occurrence is a discrepancy between what information is provided from home regarding a child's interests and that identified when they attend group care; for example, parents may say that their child has a fascination for dinosaurs or dogs, but in the group setting the child shows only a passing interest in these things. There can be a variety of reasons for this, but that which causes the most difficulty for the child is when a role is unintentionally encouraged at home, sometimes because that is what parents want to believe, for example, their child is 'particularly advanced' or is 'always happy'.

A child may behave very differently in the setting than at home, and parents may find this difficult because it is at odds with their own view of their child. Alternatively, the child may assume the same role elsewhere and this may be a greater cause for concern because the child is continuing to live a role rather than being themselves. A child may try to demonstrate that they are 'particularly clever' and may not wish to attempt certain activities in case of failure, or they may have to suppress and deny their own feelings of sadness to show they are a 'happy' child. Under such circumstances it is apparent that if adults are experiencing difficulties in acknowledging and managing their own emotions it can be extremely problematic for young children in their care who are still learning to recognize and develop their own self-control. They can become confused, emotionally vulnerable and insecure as they battle with their own developing emotions as well as those of their main carers.

A young baby's ability to copy facial expressions is one interaction that is often undervalued and, in addition to providing the basis for communication, it has another potential benefit for the developing child: control. When we play with young babies we are apt to lead the interaction. This is a natural and appropriate response since the baby needs to learn from us, but if sometimes we copy the baby's behaviour we reverse the roles. If the baby makes a sound and we copy it, and the baby makes another sound and we repeat that, and so on, until the baby loses interest, the baby is controlling the experience and the interaction tends to be of longer duration than if we take control, and even young babies love to have control over their learning. As they mature the more control infants need to have over their learning and the more valuable the experience will be for them. A toy or piece of equipment has far greater value for the developing child if they have the opportunity to control it, to explore what it is and what it does. This is often referred to as learning through exploration or discovery, and the more control a child has the greater the learning experience.

### GROUP TASK



- Sit opposite a baby of a few months old and engage their interest. When the baby utters a sound repeat as close as possible the original sound they make in pitch, tone and duration. Notice the baby's response. Continue to do this until the baby loses interest. Later repeat the activity with the same baby but with the roles reversed, that

is, try making the sounds for them to copy and notice which interaction lasts longer – when the baby leads or follows.

- Watch infants of approximately 12 months of age with a new clockwork or electronic toy that makes a sudden noise or movement. Notice their level of interest in the toy (a) when someone controls the toy so that the movement or sound is unexpected and (b) when the infant controls the sound or motion.

#### DISCUSSION POINT

Discuss the significance of what you observed in the above tasks and how both you and the baby can benefit from your observation.

A valuable opportunity often missed in allowing young children to take control and helping them develop their independence is when we join their play. We lack sensitivity because we do not fully value a child's play and although many practitioners will be offended by this statement and declare that they do value play, consider how often a child's play is disrupted in our desire to 'extend' or help develop progression. We do not watch and monitor how the play is developing before we 'join'. We sometimes use our power of authority to influence the play to take it where we want it to go in the name of assessment or meeting targets, and not let it go where the children were taking it. Yet, if we observed more carefully and took our cue from the children we would probably learn far more about them and their achievements. Play in its own right may well be valued as we appreciate its purpose, but fundamentally we may not be fully appreciating the child's behaviour in the play, which we may disrupt and interfere with in a way that we would never do with adults. If a group of adults were sitting around having coffee, happily chatting away, we would not plonk ourselves down without so much as an, 'Excuse me, may I join you?' We would wait to see where the conversation was going and for them to make space for us physically and socially before we added our own contributions. Anyone who lacks these social graces in adult company is not a good role model for helping children develop their social skills, but this is what frequently happens in group situations. We can still join in and extend play, usually by prolonging the interactions when they may otherwise lag, but we need to consider our position far more carefully before we attempt to participate.

Young children may have more sophisticated social skills in knowing how to join a group for the first time than we credit them with and possibly more than we 'teach' them. In such situations a child can be observed watching the group, often from the safety of a familiar adult. The more socially mature they are, the more adept they are at watching the whole play scene and waiting until they have an opportunity to contribute before making their move. They may provide a running commentary of the play they see, which may or may not be aimed at anyone in particular, but describes what they see happening. They may point to an

object, or pass an object to the children in the group, sometimes retreating rapidly to the security of the familiar adult. The next stage may be to position themselves closer to the playing group, still monitoring and following the rules of the existing play and eventually joining in at an appropriate point. We often feel pressurized to coerce the child to join in and rush them before they, or the playing children, are ready, and if the timing is misjudged it disrupts the play even to the extent that the existing group disbands and the play ceases, with the adult left holding the child's hand asking other children to 'play' with him or her. By behaving in this way we take the control from the child instead of allowing the child to manage the situation in their own way, in their own time. The child may well have shown greater skill than us in handling the situation, yet we consider ourselves the experts.

Most of us live in a society that currently values knowledge, information and intelligence as something above and beyond wonder and awe, and this has led in many parts of the world to a shift from a leisurely approach of learning through discovery and play to the more hasty method of being taught through instruction. To make the instruction more agreeable it has to be made to look interesting and this is achieved by making it entertaining. Many commercially available babies' toys are now designed with limited exploratory play and can shake, rattle and roll with little, if any, effort required. Press a button and a whole sequence of manoeuvres can follow, and what does the infant do in the meantime? Sit, watch and wait. There is nothing wrong with this if we are aware that the purpose of the toy is pure entertainment, with no more value to the developing child than switching on a television. Unfortunately, in our technologically based world we are led to believe that these toys have educational value and they are often supplied as such. But the human brain is wired for problem-solving. It loves challenges and making sense of things. An example of this is how very young babies are fascinated by edges. When a bold geometric design in black and white is shown to a baby as young as 6 weeks old, they will stare intently at the shape if it is held about 20 centimetres away from their face. The attention of a 10-week-old baby can be held for a considerable length of time just looking at these geometric shapes, and the intensity of their concentration is surprising as they try to make sense of what they see. We might expect commonplace objects to be of greater interest than edges and to be of more use to help a baby make sense of the everyday world. But if we consider how disoriented we become in fog, or how a blanket of snow makes it difficult to see where one thing ends and another begins, we realize how valuable edges are in helping us make sense of things and how much we rely on them but take them for granted.

With the social and political focus on childcare in the Western world, there is so much pressure on parents and practitioners to follow approved procedures and meet targets that we can get side-tracked into focusing on young children's skills and capabilities rather than on the child themselves. We can still use observations to guide us into providing for the child's next steps and this helps us to meet statutory requirements but, more significantly, observing children provides us with the opportunity to become better acquainted with the child and to appreciate their behaviour. When we share their enjoyment in their accomplishments we can begin to value the here and now instead of always looking further ahead, so that instead of worrying so much about getting it right or wrong we can celebrate that joy, wonder and awe of caring for a new baby.



**Photo 3** Dylan at 8 weeks staring intently at a bold geometric black and white design



### Further reading

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Faber, A. and Mazlish, E. (2001) *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk*. London: Piccadilly Press.

National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Murray, L. and Andrews, L. (2005) *The Social Baby; Understanding Babies' Communication from Birth*. Richmond: CP Publishing.



### Useful websites

[www.surestart.gov.uk/\\_doc/P0000204.pdf](http://www.surestart.gov.uk/_doc/P0000204.pdf)

[www.ncb.org.uk/](http://www.ncb.org.uk/)