

Adult-Child Interaction: Approaches and strategies for young children and babies

**Guidance for Early Years
Professionals**



1	BACKGROUND
2	WHEN DOES INTERACTION BEGIN?
3	ADULT-CHILD INTERACTION
4-5	MIND-MINDEDNESS
6	INTERACTION AND MOTIVATION / HANEN APPROACH
7	COMMUNICATION STYLES
8	A IS FOR
9-10	TURN TAKING
11	MAKING THE MOST OF INTERACTIONS
12	FOLLOWING THEIR LEAD
13	QUESTIONS IN INTERACTIONS
14	CHALLENGES
15	THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
16	SUPPORTING PARENTS

The aim of this booklet is to provide information and advice to Early Years Professionals in Halton who would like to know more about supporting a child's Speech, Language and Communication through quality adult-child interactions.

Background

Adult-child interaction refers to the way in which we initiate communication, and how we respond to a child's attempt to communicate. These interactions are crucial for shaping a child's communication skills, and emotional development, from birth.

Interactions are not always going to be perfect, but it's important to get it right as often as we can by being aware of how we as adults can be facilitators of language.

Communication is not a one-way street.



"...language results from the interaction between two individuals, and to focus only on the learner is to miss the basic function of language."

H. Terrace, 2013

When does interaction begin?

Interactions start before a baby is born; when mum talks or sings to her bump from around 16 weeks, she is facilitating the earliest form of adult-child interaction. When the baby is born, they will recognise their mother's voice and be comforted by the songs she sang when they were in the womb. When children feel relaxed, they are ready to learn language.

In the first 6 months children will typically turn to you when you speak, recognise familiar voices and be responsive to changes in tone of voice. By their first birthday they will typically respond to their own name, enjoy simple nursery rhymes and 'take turns' in interaction through making noises and babbling.

Around 9 months old, children will begin to develop joint attention; they will begin to make the external world the topic of communication with others.

By 5 years old, a child will typically be able to take turns in longer conversations. Those first 5 years of interactions can shape a child's communication.



Eliens (2016) videoed babies to raise awareness to parents and staff in maternity units of the importance of early communication in 'The Golden Hour', the baby's amazing alertness in the first 60 minutes or so after birth.

Parent-child interaction

Amount of interactions

Studies have found that children who have more interactions with their caregiver have larger vocabularies

Responsiveness

Studies have found that responding to child vocalisations can predict better expressive language milestones

Type of language input

Studies have found that the number of different words, length of phrases and complexity of speech a child hears improved children's expressive vocabulary

Language support strategies

A study found that the more strategies used = better language development

Vigil et al (2005) looked at parents' language behaviours towards toddlers with language delay, and parents' language to toddlers with typically developing language skills. The only difference identified in the study was the quality of the interactions. Parents of late talkers typically responded less often to their children, compared to parents of children with typical language development. Parents of 'late talkers' tended to introduce change to topics more often as an effort to engage their children in more talking. This indicated that parents tended not to **follow their child's lead**.

Mind-mindedness

From research led by Psychologist Elizabeth Meins, mind-mindedness is a concept in developmental psychology referring to a caregiver's tendency to view their child as an individual with a mind.

It refers to parents' ability or willingness to represent their children's likely thoughts and feelings - not just through actions but through using appropriate words. Parents assume their children's behaviour is meaningful, and tune into their children's emotions, desires, and interests. They accurately read their children's communicative cues.

Babies thrive when their parents assume they have minds of their own, and take the time to figure out what their babies are thinking and feeling. In particular, children seem to benefit when they have "mind-minded" parents who communicate accurately about mental and emotional states.

To practice mind-mindedness parenting, caregivers need to do more than talk about thoughts and feelings. They need to make comments that are attuned to what's really going on.

Over the last two decades, extensive international research has demonstrated that parental mind-mindedness is good for children's development.

Mind-mindedness predicts children's language and play abilities at age two, and their understanding of other people's thoughts and feelings throughout the preschool and early school years.



What is an attuned comment?

A comment would be classed as appropriate if it matches the child's behaviour: *"Oh, you want the teddy"* (as the baby gestures towards it), or *'Are you making a decision about something?'* (as the baby sits quietly with a pensive expression on his or her face).

Some comments involve the adult attributing an inappropriate internal state to the baby. For example, a mother might say, *"you're not interested in that one any more"* (while the baby is still actively engaged in the toy). We call these non-attuned mind-related comments.

An adult who makes a lot of non attuned comments will be considered relatively low in mind-mindedness, while an adult who makes mostly appropriate mind-related comments will be considered more highly mind-minded. Quality language learning interactions involve making as many attuned comments as possible in every day routines and activities.



Interaction and Motivation

Factors affecting adult interaction and motivation

- Highly motivated to learn - adult is concerned about their child's difficulties and wants to do something about it
- Values - as adults we have a set of personal values we have developed through life. One set of values is that of 'child centredness'.

All parents fall somewhere on a continuum of child-centredness ranging from being highly adult directed to being highly child-centred.



Hanen Approach

Ayala Hanen Manolson, a speech-language pathologist in Montreal (Canada) developed an innovative program for groups of parents whose children had significant language delays in 1975. Her program gathered parents in a group for a series of sessions and taught them how they could help their children to develop their communication skills. The success of this program, which eventually became It Takes Two To Talk® - The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children with Language Delays, led to the establishment of The Hanen Centre and paved the way for the development of other Hanen Programs®

"It is now widely accepted that parental involvement through parent training is the most effective method of language intervention for infants and young children" (Hanen)

Communication Styles

Initiate

Does the child initiate interactions?

Some children initiate interactions with ease whilst others don't



Respond

Does the child respond?

Some children readily respond while others don't

CHILD'S COMMUNICATION STYLE	INITIATES	RESPONDS
SOCIABLE	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
PASSIVE	✗ No	✗ No
OWN AGENDA	✳ Rarely	✗ Rarely/ No
RELUCTANT	✳ Rarely	✓ Yes

A is for

A

Allow

Allow the child to lead

A

Adapt

Adapt to enable you to share new experiences together with the child

A

Add

Add new experiences and language

Adding more

Try using the following approach to develop expressive and receptive language.

Expressive language

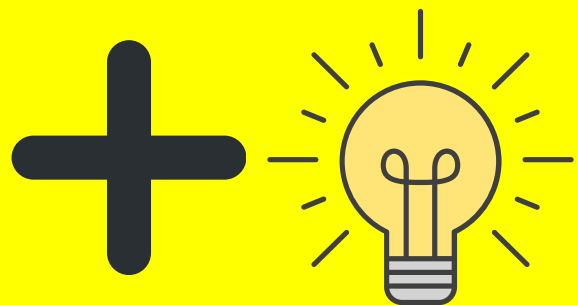
What we SAY



ADD one WORD

Receptive language

What we UNDERSTAND



ADD one IDEA

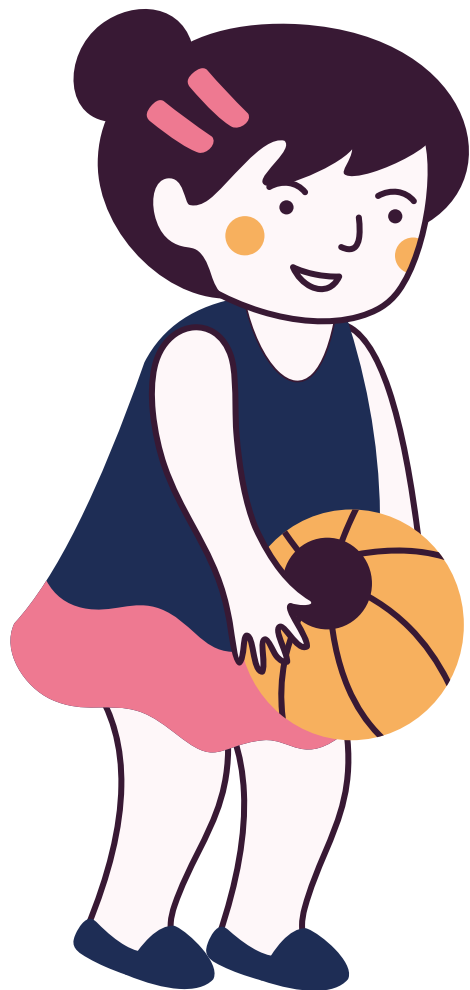
Turn taking

In the context of interaction, turn taking is a skill that young children begin to learn from a very early age. Turn-taking is fundamental for two-way interaction. Frequent conversational turns enables children to practise language and gain feedback from adults. In the very early stages we take turns with children making noises, pulling faces, and doing actions which develops through language maturity to taking turns within a conversation.

A recent study suggested that conversational turn-taking led to improved scores on verbal language assessment and the development of language-related brain function in young children.

Imagine playing catch with another person. Both of you have a basket filled with balls. Sometimes the ball will be dropped and rolls away, so one of you will pick a new ball and start throwing it to each other again. The ball is the topic of your conversation, and each time you catch it you comment on the topic. If you throw the ball too fast or not at the person, they might drop the ball (topic) and get a new ball (new topic of conversation).

Children at a very young age will use lots of balls in their basket, and take less turns throwing the ball back and forth. As children grow, they should be able to throw one ball back and forth for longer (sharing a topic of conversation). This is where basic 'taking a turn' (throwing lots of different balls back and forth) becomes more established 'sharing a topic of conversation' (throwing one ball back and to). We shape this ability through modelling conversations.

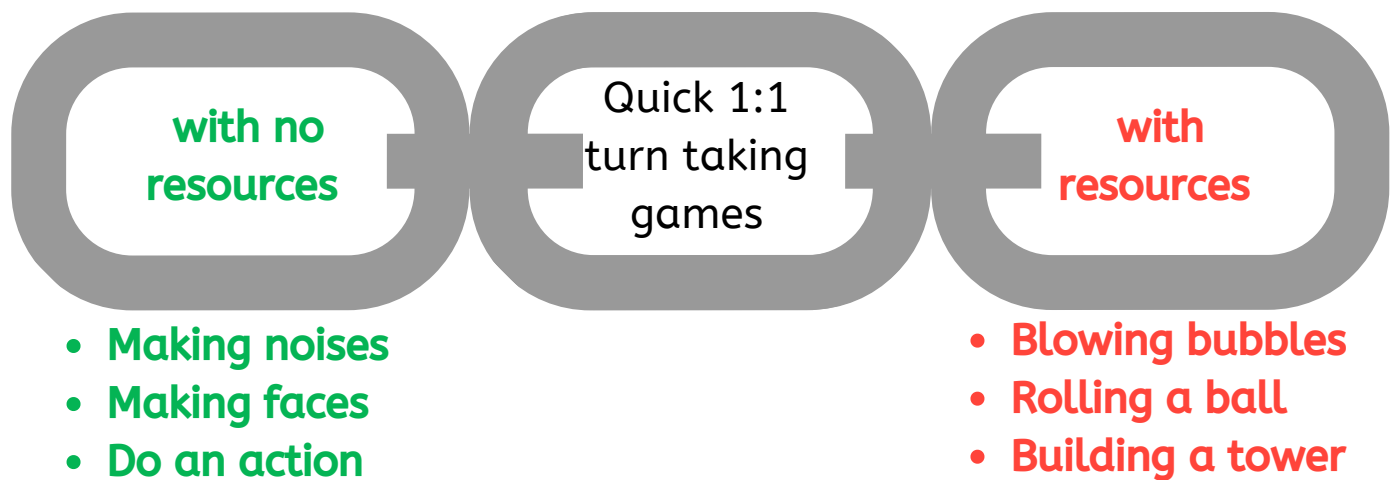


Turn taking

Turn taking can build gradually with more and more people involved to 'take a turn', more complex games and longer waiting times before a turn. Taking turns becomes an increasingly important aspect of a child's social development.

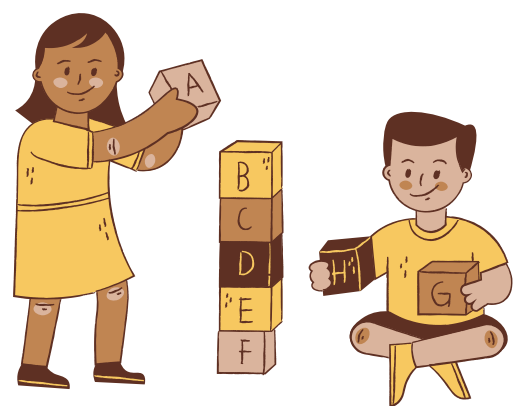
You can support children to take turns and share topics of conversation by:

- Matching the length of the child's turn
- Matching the child's pace
- Matching the child's interest



Turn taking games can then progress to involving more complex games with rules e.g. pairs or snakes and ladders.

**My turn,
your turn**



Making the most of interactions

To provide a good communication environment, we need to consider what makes a good interaction 'good'. Here we need to think about about what we **DO**, what we **SAY** and **HOW** we say it. Following a child's lead is a good place to start.

Follow their lead - why?

We want to make talking fun!

Removes the focus on what you would expect

It develops their understanding because what you say will be relevant

You are showing them that you are interested in them and the things they enjoy which builds trust and relationships

Saves the energy of trying to get the child's attention and motivate them - they are already showing you what they are interested in

Children learn best when they are interested because they focus on what they enjoy.

Follow their lead - how?



Sit near the child and watch them, face to face



Listen to what they say, watch what they do



Wait to see if they look at you, point or say a word or sounds



WAIT - up to 10 seconds, but keep showing interest



Once you've watched and listened to your child, it's time to respond.



You could:

- Imitate (actions/sounds/words)
- Imitate and add a word
- Interpret (say what the child might say)
- Comment



Top tip:

Talk a little slower in chunks and think about how you use your voice. Do you exaggerate tone, pitch to make your voice easier to tune in to?

Questions in interactions

Adults use questions with good intentions – questions require a response and theoretically should always result in some sort of talking. Questions might also give the child a chance to show off what they can do, and stimulate more complex thinking. But quite often, we use too many questions or the wrong type. The questions we ask young children sometimes require very little response from the child e.g. *"is that your shoe?"*, or are too complex for them to answer e.g. *"why did you do that?"*. Questions can also put children under pressure to give an answer, and can lead to some children saying less rather than more.



Questions that HELP

- YES/NO (early development)
- Choice
- WH questions

Questions that STOP



- TEST
- Too hard – not developmental level
- Don't reflect the child's interests
- You already know the answer to
- Child does not have time to answer
- Questions that answer themselves
- Bombard
- Limiting questions

Balance the use of questions by

- Use comments – they are less directive which can lead to the child saying more
- Ask sincere questions (e.g. you don't know the answer)
- Ask questions that match the child's interest
- Alternate questions and comments
- Think about how you can change questions into a comment
- Don't be afraid of silence – it gives you a chance to watch, wait and listen to the child!

Challenges

It's important to acknowledge the challenges of working with two, three and four year-olds.

Making time for talk can be challenging in busy, free-flow play environments. Especially when the children need a lot of support and care.

IMPORTANT!

Prioritising time for talk in small groups is important.

It is the quality of time spent which matters more than anything else!

REMEMBER!

Children need a key person throughout their whole lives, who can give them lots of time and emotional support

Without this sort of social and emotional support, many children simply will not talk. After all, you are much more likely to talk with someone whom you care about, and who is interested in you!

Care routines, like nappy changing, can easily be times for communication too. You could make up a special song with the child, or talk them through everything you are doing.

Home Learning Environment

“Language skills are shaped and nurtured by a child’s home learning environment, which includes the physical characteristics of the home and the quality of the learning support they receive from parents and carers.”

Melhuish, E. C. (2010). ‘Impact of the home learning environment on child cognitive development: secondary analysis of data from Growing Up in Scotland’

Barriers that parents/carers may face

CAPABILITY	OPPORTUNITY	MOTIVATION
Parents may not understand the importance of language development or the activities that support it due to their own low literacy skills, lack of confidence or because they may not see a need for these skills	Fewer financial resources, physical environments in/near the home, poor health, the reality of daily life	Parents may not understand the potential benefit of early language development or education. They may be prioritising other areas of child development and wellbeing



Supporting parents

Practitioners are vital in supporting parents and carers to provide a rich home language environment

Talk to parents about WellComm and what it means to them and their child

Provide activities from the Big Book of Ideas - 1 or 2 at a time - and follow it up

Celebrate the good things they are doing

Invite parents/carers to come into the setting to see a good communication environment

Encourage visits to the library and Children's Centre groups

Show them the 'Tiny Happy People' website/instagram - it has lots of ideas and tips

Highlight to parents that they are the best tool, not toys - interactions are the most important

And always encourage parents to... CHAT, PLAY, READ

CHAT

Encourage reciprocal talking

PLAY

Language thrives when children interact and explore in a playful and creative manner

READ

Sharing books, parents and children talking together