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Articles for the 90th anniversary of Early Education

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## **Children under three years: the time of their lives**

Marion Dowling

There has been a revolution in our understanding of very young children. We now know that they are far more competent and capable than we ever realised. No longer do we regard young babies as helpless, but as individuals who are born learners – “a brain in waiting” as Maria Robinson (2009) describes. And the early years is a time of remarkable all-round development.

## Physical and sensory progress

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Young children’s bodies are at the core of their learning and development. And progress is rapid.

Early motor and sensory experiences allow babies and infants to absorb, sort out and make sense of the world around them. All five senses - taste, smell, sound, sight and touch - are used in the child’s exploration. Margaret Donaldson described movement as thought in action



“Children have first to experience the world actively through all their senses before they can think in the abstract and hold thoughts on the memory of those things in their heads as pictures, concepts or symbols.”

**(Donaldson, 1978:37)**

The average weight of a baby increases four times in the first three years of life. By the age of three most children are naturally active, can move easily, have good spatial awareness, balance and co-ordination. The brain and body work together through the physical senses. Babies and infants initially find out about the people and things around them through physical experiences and express their thoughts and feelings through movement, sound and gestures. They are growing to understand the world using enactive (active) representations to make sense as suggested by Bruner (1966).

Around six months babies can grab their feet and with increased movement they are alerted to other parts of their bodies. Mobile babies learn to secure their bodies to the ground and keep their balance as they discover how to steady their bodies differently as they stagger across grassy, stony or soft sand surfaces, or move up a step or around a corner. As they re-visit these experiences again and again they begin to recall how their bodies respond differently. These memories are the start of thinking in the abstract.

## Living and learning with others

Babies are attracted to others from birth and grow up initially in a social world made up of the immediate family. To ensure their healthy growth and development, very young children need to feel securely attached with a trusted and familiar person, usually their birth parent. This initial attachment underpins further relationships with other family members and friends.

Depending on their family experiences infants will have learned a great deal about getting on with people. They may have had many and varied opportunities to meet a wide circle of different adults and children. Others may have been sheltered from social contacts, been brought up in a culture of privacy, or live in geographically isolated areas with no other young children to relate to. Nevertheless, whatever social experiences young children have had before coming to a nursery setting it is likely that some relationships will have been established since babyhood and will have developed with the support of parents.



Infants start to relate to a key person and a wider group of adults when they move from the security of home to a childminder or group childcare setting. Moving into a new environment and facing often a completely unknown group of children and adults is a challenge for any child. For a 2-year-old who has experienced only a small social circle of contacts at home the transition can be both distressing and daunting. When a young child makes this move the primary need is to link with a new adult who provides a framework of security similar to that offered at home.

We all need other people to help us learn and infants need adults and other children. A young child's ability to form good relationships not only enhances her personal development but helps her to progress intellectually. A close adult acts as a child's companion, being available and interested, playing alongside and having easy conversations with them. The adult also supports an infant to develop relationships with other children. Vygotsky strongly supported social learning, claiming that mental activity begins with social contacts and exchanges between people. Vygotsky (1962) suggested that what the child does in co-operation with others she eventually learns to do alone.

Learning with and from their peers starts early. Babies are often fascinated by the play of other children and from around 15 months, they may play alongside others for short periods of time. From around 30 months they start to play in a group joining in with what others are doing and sometimes contributing ideas (cf Early Education, 2012:9). Inevitably many are inexperienced players but older infants can be encouraged to learn in daily

routines the skills of turn taking, sharing and helping others.

Once an infant has taken steps to enter the play of other children, huge progress in social development can occur. By three years some children will be practised group players.

## Brain development: being open to possibilities

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The parts of the young brain that deal with feelings are in place at birth while the pre-frontal cortex which is to do with thinking, planning and focusing develops much later and grows slowly. It may be thought that, as babies, these mature adult structures are lacking, but current research argues that this lack can actually be a benefit (Gopnik, 2009; Scott, 2010). The pre-frontal cortex assists thinking as it helps us to restrict distractions, narrow our options and allows a person to concentrate on a topic. As babies and infants lack this inhibitor it allows them to be open to all possibilities. A walk with an infant can prove a frustrating or intriguing

experience, depending on the frame of mind you are in and the time you have available. If you need to get to the shops quickly, your toddler's exploration on the journey of every paving stone, minibeast and weed in the gutter can exasperate; however, if you can join your child in their investigation, the world can become a different place as you share the wonder in the seemingly mundane.

Gopnik suggests that because babies cannot yet focus on the particular they are able to be more flexible. Their options are endless. Infants, like adults, are strongly attracted to new or unexpected events and, just like adults, they lose attention when they get bored. However, while adults can be interested in both general external events and in something of particular relevance to them, babies and infants are entranced by everything and anything. This initial ability to Hoover up so much information provides a very young child with a fund of rich experiences (Gopnik, 2009:118-119).

## Being separate and distinct

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As a result of being secure and cared for, a baby becomes confident and strengthens his identity.

Around nine months he starts to recognise that his interests may be shared by others. He will follow an object that someone else is involved with and will alert another special person to something of interest by pointing to it. This indicates that the baby begins to understand that he is a person in his own right, that other people are separate from him with their



own thoughts and feelings but that they may share his interest. This is called 'theory of mind'. He may also use another person as a social reference; how do they respond to something new – a stranger coming into the room, a clap of thunder. The baby is heavily influenced by his special person and tends to imitate their reactions to a situation.

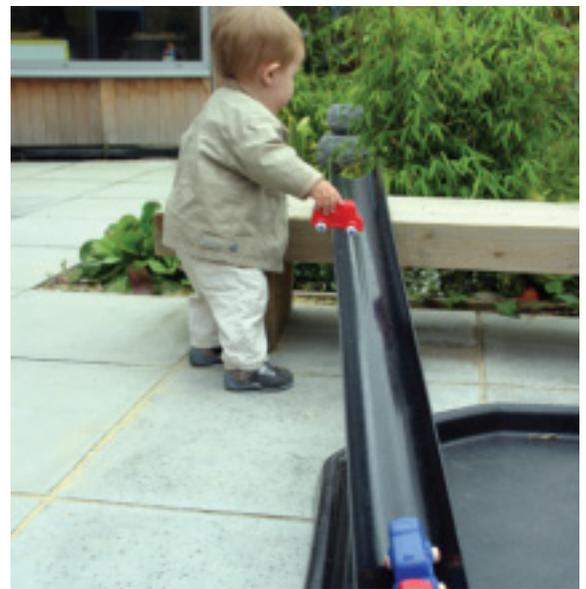
## Understanding about object and person permanence

Around this time, a rush of brain activity produces a further shift in the baby's understanding. Before this a baby believes that when an article or person disappears from sight it is gone forever.

Kwame, at 8 months, was playing with a soft toy monkey. He handed it to his dad and appeared to watch dad hide the monkey under the sofa. Kwame behaved as though the monkey no longer existed, even when dad reached under the sofa to retrieve it. Thinking in the present, the baby believes that if you cannot see it that it no longer exists.

A few weeks later the baby takes a mental step forward. He realises that that an article can be hidden and retrieved and enjoys practising this game for himself testing that the object can always be rediscovered. This understanding of the permanence of objects extends to person permanence and is closely linked to a baby's readiness to be separated from his family. Initially a young baby is not unduly upset if he is given into the care of a friendly but unfamiliar person. Once his special person departs, he

appears no longer to keep her in his mind, and after some initial hesitation will adapt to someone different. However the older baby has a greater understanding. He knows now that his special person's disappearance does not mean that she has gone for ever. He grasps the possibility that she is still around somewhere and becomes anxious and fretful to have her back in order to feel secure and safe.



## Having intentions

Babies are born with a passion to find out. Gopnik and colleagues (1999) suggest that 2-year-olds have a particular drive to grasp all around them, seen in their boundless energy to investigate and make sense. What's more, given opportunities, babies and infants start to show clear intentions about what they want to investigate, consider and do. This amazing persistent and determined behaviour signals the young child as a 'going concern' growing and developing every minute as she builds a model of the world that she can understand (Winnicott, 1964). These intentions are

closely linked to the young child taking responsibility to control or regulate her thinking and feelings. Martha Bronson (2000:5) describes how self-regulation is fuelled by motivation, helping young children to control their learning by getting physical, social and cognitive activities started and then providing the energy and force necessary to keep them going. Bronson further suggests that three components of self-regulation are: to organise information so that it makes sense to the individual; to predict events; and to find a more interesting way to solve a problem (op cit p149).

2-year-old Roxane couldn't find her hat to wear outside where it was drizzling with rain. Recognising that she needed some protection from the weather she solved the problem by emptying the waste paper basket and placing it on her head.

## What do close adults do?

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Once we are aware of the phenomenal all-round development of babies and infants it becomes crystal clear that a good start in the earliest months of life is critical for longer term development and achievement.

“How we treat 0-2 year olds shapes their lives – and ultimately our society”

**(Wave Trust/DfE, 2013:3)**

Extensive evidence points up the plasticity of the very young brain and how the very young child is receptive to all experiences (David et al, 2003; Evangelou et al, 2009). These research findings imply that there is tremendous potential to depress or enhance early development.



Parents provide the initial nurturing relationships which affirm children. Close to that is the support and care offered by childminders and in group settings. But not just any childcare: young children will only develop well if they attend good quality provision (Smith et al, 2009).

In this brief article it is only possible to highlight some of the most important criteria for good quality provision namely, relationships, early communication, and the environment.

## The importance of early relationships and the key person

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Studies suggest that where children start their lives having at least one special person with whom they build a strong bond or attachment this helps them to resist stress in their early years and later on in life (David et al, 2003:146). Babies and infants cannot become competent learners until they feel secure, loved and cared for.

Attunement is a natural extension of attachment. Through becoming close



and loving the special person becomes familiar with the baby. Attunement means being on the same wavelength; this is sometimes referred to as a “dance of dialogue” (Read, 2010:17). Importantly this ‘dance’ is bespoke or tailor-made to each unique baby.

Attuned responses are dependent on knowing a young child’s particular traits:

- What interests her and how long can she sustain this interest?
- How does she show that she is tired or uncomfortable?
- What do her signals and gestures convey?

The special person shows that they recognise the baby’s messages and responds rapidly through smiles, gestures and a warm touch (Dowling, 2012:44). Over time, if babies’ signals are handled in this way they will begin to trust that mum or a carer is always there to ‘make things better’. The most effective provision is based on ‘contingent care’, which responds to the baby’s actual needs rather than what the carer thinks he might need (Gerhardt, 2004:197). From a safe and secure base the young child will start to explore her surroundings and become open to new experiences.

If experiences are repeated often enough, connections between brain cells are strengthened. When babies are provided with familiar and consistent routines this helps them to start to make sense of what is happening to them: they begin to build up a predictable mental structure in their lives. Daily routines such as feeding, nappy changing and bath times allow a baby and her special person to enjoy loving exchanges which the baby starts to anticipate with pleasure.

A strong early attachment enables child to establish wider social attachments as they grow up. If a baby is physically and emotionally close to one person initially (usually the birth mother) this makes later separation from her more tolerable rather than less.

The need for intimate interaction through close attachment continues when the child is moved to a childminder or a group setting and this is where the key person plays a critical role. Knowing that babies and infants thrive on familiarity and predictability, this means ensuring a continuity of attention through a staff member developing a personal relationship with that child. Although it is now mandatory for all children in the Early Years Foundation Stage to have a key person, in reality the role is sometimes shared. However, babies and infants moving into a new setting need to have the security of one special person being available for them. The provision of a transitional object further supports child who needs something that will remind them of the loved parent and home that they have left. A soft, cuddly toy or blanket becomes a comforter and provides the link with the familiar people and things that the child misses in a strange new place. Personal items

can be equally comforting, such as mum's scarf which smells of her. These serve a very important role in helping children to remember home and hold onto their known world when moving into new territory (Winnicott, 1965).



## Communication

Very young children use every means at their disposal to reach out to familiar people, especially their bodies and facial gestures. Before children use spoken language we are dependent on tuning into their needs, interests and responses by observing their levels of concentration, eye gaze, facial expressions and body language. Signing is also a wonderful form of communication and is very inclusive. When all young children are encouraged to sign, this enables shared exchanges when many 2- and 3-year-olds struggle with words.

Communication is reciprocal. Close adults converse with babies using songs and rhymes and adapt their voice and facial expressions to make messages clear. This is sometimes described as 'parentese' and involves:

- slowing down the voice and speaking in a musical way
- exaggerating the vowel sounds
- using facial expressions, moving close to the baby, raising eyebrows and smiling widely.

Use of 'parentese' is an invitation for the baby to 'catch' and copy the messages, which in turn invite another response from the adult.

An explosion in spoken language during the third year of life reveals more about each child. We can listen and note when they:

- use favourite words such as 'teddy', 'book', or 'doggy', which may be related to their interests
- use language to help regulate their behaviour, for example, when climbing stairs 'steady', 'careful'
- talk to make sense of social boundaries, 'no', 'naughty'
- use their logic in creating plurals which are grammatically incorrect, 'mices', 'shoeses'.

As a model and companion in communication with infants, practitioners may also reflect on their use of language:

- the range of vocabulary they provide
- the easy, reciprocal conversations they have with infants
- the kinds of explanations they use in response to children's questions.

## The environment

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In Reggio Emilia schools parents and carers are regarded as the first two teachers and the environment is rightly described as the third. However, spacious areas and a range of equipment are not ends in themselves. The crucial factor is how this physical provision supports the developmental needs of very young children.

Outdoor provision easily lends itself to children's natural means of learning. They urgently need to become adept at using their bodies and there should be scope and encouragement for infants to learn to run, balance, climb, jump, throw and catch. These skills are often used in their play.

Emerging interests or schemes of thinking also run through infants' play and are initially linked with movement. These repeated patterns of play behaviour are known as schemas (Louis, 2013). They may become pre-occupied with transporting outside, using wheelbarrows to move leaves and fir cones. Ropes and pulleys allow



exploration of moving things up and down, while using found and natural materials to build dens strengthens interests about hiding and enclosures. Cosy, warm spaces invite babies and infants to feel secure and hide away as well as become convivial with others.

Close adults will observe and encourage these actions through providing space and additionally needed resources to aid schematic play.

Finally, young children's intentions will strengthen in a well-ordered and predictable layout of continuous provision. As they become familiar with what is available infants will learn to combine materials and innovate, bringing in their own ideas and initiatives.

## End words

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What a privilege it is to live and work with children at this early season of their lives when they grow before our eyes. Through astute observations and sensitive conversations we can capture their competencies and processes of learning. We can never be sure though of what they will demonstrate tomorrow. There is everything to play for.

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