

Book Review

Communication for the Early Years: An Holistic Approach
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The book considers perspectives of the child, family, and practitioner to encourage a holistic and collaborative understanding of interaction and the role this plays in a child's development, while case studies, examples from practice and reflective questions inspire discussion, challenge thinking, and encourage the application of research in practice. An in-depth exploration of the factors which impact on the development of a child's communication skills, this is key reading for students and practitioners in the Early Years, as well as those involved in their training and continued professional development.

A Review of Chapter 2 'Let's begin at the beginning...'

In this chapter, Dr. Carole Ulanowsky poses the question why some children grow up to be competent, socially aware communicators while others do not, as she clear-sightedly tries to tackle some of today's tricky childcare conundrums, arguing that the successful future adult lies in the babe-in-arms.

First, Ulanowsky deals with the perinatal period, from the pre-birth months in the womb to the end of the first year of life, when the infant brain will have doubled in size as the child starts its amazingly rapid journey towards cognition. Initially, the mother's voice will have the strongest influence on the baby, who will have heard her intonation and inflexions in the womb, laying the foundations for its own native language. In 'the Golden Hour', i.e. the first 60 minutes after birth, the newborn is super-alert and videos have shown him/her mimicking an adult's facial expressions in an attempt to communicate. However, in a recent survey by What About the Children?, nearly half of respondents disagreed with the statement that very young babies could communicate from birth (although fewer women disagreed than men.) More education is clearly needed, argues Ulanowsky.

Positive experiences in the early years will set a human being on a good trajectory for the rest of his/her life as emotional security will help cognitive development and reinforce confidence. In order for this to happen, a sound attachment needs to be established between the primary carer(s) and the infant. It is therefore essential for all carers, both inside and outside the family, to understand and apply the attachment process. For the first six months, a child needs one-to-one care as he/she sees no separation between him/herself and the carer, but the period from 6 – 24 months brings greater individuation as he/she starts to explore his/her environs and native language. During this time, the carer – usually the mother – will respect her child's need to be his/her own person and they must both learn to understand and respect each other's needs. Generally, hormones change in the mother's brain before the birth, bringing a rush of love and desire to nurture her infant, but it must also be acknowledged that a lack of these hormones can lead to a noticeably smaller maternal brain and an angry baby who may feel rejected, leading to future problems and even violence. Some depressed mothers, or those who were badly mothered themselves, may show little empathy for their babies, who may grow up to lack empathy for their own children, and so it goes on.

There have been several international initiatives to try and improve the quality of child-rearing, notably from Holland, America and Canada. The University of Leiden (2015) initiated a system of Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) to help parents interact with their babies and to understand what the baby is trying to 'say'. Secondly, in the early 1990s, American scientists discovered that a wide use of vocabulary in the home had a direct correlation with the child's future academic performance and IQ levels, so they invented a Safecare training module which counted the number of parent-child interactions during the day. They discovered a wide intellectual discrepancy at age 12 between those children who had been talked to a lot from those who hadn't. Finally, in Canada, the Roots of Empathy programme initiated a system of bringing in babies to a High school classroom every three weeks so that the students could watch the baby's progress and try to guess what it was feeling, or wanting. This has been trialled in some British schools, with some success.

How does our 21st Century environment affect childrearing? It doesn't help, say school leaders, who comment that school readiness has fallen in the last five years, especially in communication and physical skills. Time-poor parents, combined with the intrusion of social media and smartphones, mean that more and more parental attention is being siphoned away from their offspring, with the result that children's lack of visual skill is affecting their reading readiness. 77% of respondents in a recent survey agreed that social media inhibited parent/child interaction. In a ground-breaking study (2014), Suzanne Zeedyk argued that buggies which face the carer created more adult/child interaction than buggies which face outwards, and it may be calmer for very young children not to face the noisy road; her ideas have been taken up by buggy manufacturers.

In today's world, it is inevitable that increasing numbers of young children will spend long days in non-parental care as more mothers return to work, either from choice or from necessity. The Key Person (KP) – or Key Carer – is a very important person, albeit poorly paid and of low status in worldly terms. What are our desired outcomes for the Early Years? In another survey question about the best care for under-threes, over half (59%) said that they thought group care was better than individual care: are they right? Ideally, day care should reflect home care as closely as possible in family groups, with the same KP staying with a child until they move on to the next stage (Reception), but this is not always done. The gap between stated policy (i.e. aims and desired outcomes) and the reality can be quite marked, especially on the subject of touch when comforting a distressed child. Should the KP kiss and cuddle a young child when he/she is upset, or is this a violation of safeguarding policy? There should be complete trust between the parent and the person who is looking after the child, both through face-to-face communication and online. Funding is another important issue, as the government decides on the ratio of adults to children, but the funding doesn't always stretch to the ideal ratio, so children might get overlooked by overworked staff. When a very young child or toddler starts at nursery, he/she may feel utterly abandoned and it requires a very sensitive carer to restore his/her emotional balance. By the time a child is three years old, the brain is 90% of its adult size, so it is important to get these early years right, for his/her future wellbeing. It is too late to fix things later on.

Experiments have been done with saliva swabs to indicate the level of cortisol (the 'stress' hormone) in a child's body when he/she is cared for away from home. Normally, most of us experience higher levels of cortisol in the morning, gradually reducing by the end of the day, but it has been discovered that small children's levels of cortisol can remain high all day long, even among children who appear to have 'settled' at nursery. Equally, the antibody Immunoglobulin A, which fights infections, appears to be decreasing, so the child at daycare may be at risk of catching multiple infections. Early Years practitioners need to be trained to help their young charges to cope in a crowded setting. Suzanne Zeedyk claims that children are naturally programmed to be wary of strangers, so they should be exposed to as few different carers as possible. But some parents are jealous of their child's attachment to a secondary carer and take pains to avoid this danger, preferring to send their infant to a nursery school with multiple carers rather than employ a childminder or nanny. All nursery outlets are subject to the twin demands of an OFSTED-style inspection to ensure good educational standards against the economic demands of a budget which may not allow for high standards, or wellbeing. Under-threes should be treated separately from pre-schoolers; their needs are more emotional than academic.

It could be argued that a child's right to a happy childhood is a matter for the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) and any deviation should be regarded as an infringement of human rights. Under-threes cannot complain for themselves, but the result of a shortfall in care may have repercussions later in life – and be much more costly to put right. If necessary, taxes should be raised to provide a better service for the under-threes. It is questionable whether the drive to send mothers back into the workplace comes from the Treasury, which views women as a valuable economic resource, or from women themselves who wish to escape the shackles of domesticity. Recent statistics from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) reveal that more than three-quarters of women with dependent children are now in work, so the State has replaced the Family as chief child-carer. They had better get it right, for the sake of the mental and physical health of future generations!

In this chapter, Carole Ulanowsky has amply demonstrated how some children go on to become successful adults, while others fall through the cracks, due to insufficient attention to their needs as very young children.

Sally Greenhill Nov 2019