A Skilful Communicator

This chapter provides research information and ideas about the baby and child as *A Skilful Communicator*, the focus of the second aspect of the Framework *Birth to Three Matters*. This aspect includes: being a sociable and effective communicator; listening and responding appropriately to the language of others; and making meaning. To become skilful communicators, babies and children need to be together with the people who are important to them, with whom they have a warm and loving relationship. Being together leads to the wider development of social relations so that children become adept at forming friendships, being able to empathise, share emotions and experiences. It is through these interactions and upon these foundations that they become competent language users. When early attempts at finding a voice are rewarded in a variety of ways, babies become more confident to extend their range of vocalisations and increase their language skills. Babies use their voices to make contact, let people know what they need and how they feel. They are also starting to learn about ‘conversation’, which requires the ability to listen and respond appropriately, and to learn the ‘rules’ of communication through making meaning with the familiar people in their lives. One of the main ‘messages’ of this aspect of the Framework is that, above all, those around them need to value, interpret and respond to babies’ and young children’s early attempts to converse.

**Being together**
This section of the literature review is devoted to some of the research available about babies and their ability to communicate with the significant people in their lives. As Jerome Bruner points out:

‘Infants are, in a word, tuned to enter the world of human action. ... It is obvious that an enormous amount of the activity of the child during the first year and a half of life is extraordinarily social and communicative…Even in the opening weeks of life the infant has the capacity to imitate facial and manual gestures; they respond with distress if their mothers are masked during feeding; and, they show a sensitivity to expression in the mother by turn taking in vocalization when their level of arousal is moderate and by simultaneous expression when it is high.’ (Bruner 1983: 27).

Indeed Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001) claim, in their exciting and informative text on early language development, that during its last months in the uterus the foetus develops a growing sensitivity to the unique qualities of its mother’s voice and rhythms of its native language.
For example researchers have established that babies as young as four days and even earlier can distinguish the language spoken by their mother and family from another language, although they do not discriminate between unknown languages. For example French researchers (see Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith 2001: 17) used a sucking technique to explore this. They found that babies suck harder when hearing French than when hearing Russian but their rate of sucking showed no difference between Russian and English.

Goldschmeid and Selleck (1996: 11) argue that ‘constancy in relationships with “mothers” is necessary for babies to learn to communicate’. By mothers they mean ‘a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing childcare is a significant part of her or his working life’ (Goldschmeid and Selleck 1996: 6).

Above all, babies appear to come into the world with a drive to be near familiar people:-

- Even at a few weeks old the infant’s love affair with people is shown by different reactions to persons, as opposed to interesting objects. Moving objects may be watched and reached for, but people, especially a carer, are responded to with smiles, lip movements and arm waving…

- Getting into relationships with people probably begins in the earliest hours of life: many newborns will imitate adult face and hand movements (Whitehead 1996: 4).

Murray and Trevarthen (1985) showed that from two months of age, around the time they also engage in social smiling, infants are sensitive to ‘social contingency’ (the mother’s responsiveness to the infant’s signals), especially to the timing of their mothers’ emotional attunement in their two-way exchanges. These attuned exchanges indicate the development of primary intersubjectivity – the rudiments of turn taking, sensitive timing and responsiveness to the other’s behaviour, especially facial expressions. Intersubjectivity is thought to be the foundation of early social interaction. Such early, playful interactions are called protoconversations and they gradually offer the young child opportunities for anticipating and predicting and they form the basis for social and cognitive advances that occur during the first year (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001).

However, as Goldschmeid and Selleck (1996: 11) stress:-

- Young babies are only sociable, loving and curious about each other if they have already developed trusting, secure relationships with close and protective adults. Babies who do not have opportunities to touch, gaze, coo and babble with responsive adults give up on conversation-like exchanges. There is evidence of this from the work of Goldschmeid in state institutions for groups of abandoned children in Trieste, Italy in 1954. These children had excellent physical care but no personal care. The babies who persistently failed to get attention
from an adult became withdrawn, passive and despairing. They stopped looking for friendship in adults or with other children... Sometimes this is not recognised for what it is, but is mistaken for contentment.'

As long ago as the 1970s, research by Snow (1977), Snow and Ferguson (1977), and others was demonstrating that although babies who are three months old do not contribute much to a conversation through vocalising, they already have general ‘rules’ about communicating. For example, they will gaze at the familiar adult and sustain an interaction in a pattern which matches exactly that of two adults in conversation.

In their book, *The Social Baby*, Murray and Andrews (2000), the authors not only provide superb photographic evidence of babies communicating from birth, they state that babies are attracted to other people from the moment they are born. In addition, they very soon show a preference for the people who have become familiar to them. However, babies do not just want to near their family members and friends, they also want to interact with those people and share their experiences (Murray and Andrews 2000).

Further, babies become quiet when their mother or other familiar person approaches, apparently primed for interaction. By the age of three months, a baby who has begun vocalising and who gets a response (being talked to and other types of positive attention) will increase the amount of vocalisation. Snow also points out that mothers will usually simplify their speech, restricting the content, using repetition, simplifying grammar and emphasising intonation. Babies and children are able to give feedback clues which tell the adults around them when the simplified speech can be modified a little to become more like the type we would use to an experienced language user.

Bruner (1983) cites the work of Piaget in remarking that babies may spend their time doing only a small range of activities (such as banging, reaching, looking) but they are systematic in their repetitions of these activities. He adds that we should not be surprised therefore, that they are also systematic when it comes to language, as the work of Weir (1962)(on spontaneous speech in the cot) and Bowerman’s (1978) on children’s spontaneous errors, show.

When babies and children interact with each other, they have a different ‘voice’ according to Goldschmeid and Selleck (1996: 17). ‘Their conversations flow to and fro through complex and personal activity. Children communicate firstly through intense gazing, vigorous sucking and exploratory touching and vocalisations.’ They cite the research observations of Whaley and Rubenstein (1994), who noted that toddlers develop rituals, using objects as props, developing intimacy and communicating non-verbally. In one relationship two children would use their feeding bottles in a ritual that
involved them in alternately drinking and then placing the bottles on their feet. This ritual of imitating with similar objects not only promoted their friendship, it was a way of excluding other toddlers. As Rouse Selleck (1995: cited in the Framework ‘Birth to Three Matters – Finding a Voice’) assert: ‘Although most infants do not learn to talk until their second year, their voices are there for us to hear from birth.’

The first three years contribute substantially to children being highly proficient in language by the time they are six. Although language is learnt on several different levels at the same time (Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith 2001) – they do not simply learn vocabulary then move on to grammar, etc. - they must get to grips with the sounds of language (phonology); words (vocabulary); the way words are ordered (grammar); the way sentences are put together to mean something (discourse); as well as how to use language (Tabors 1997). As Whitehead (2002) stresses, a child’s first word is based on experience of listening, observing and experimenting with sounds and making highly selective imitations of familiar people.

Trevarthen (2000) analysed the musicality of rhyming games and he found that they follow the same patterns (such as the lengths of utterances by the adult) before the infant makes a contribution, as in relaxed, mutually enjoyable baby-adult interactions. It seems that no other animals engage in games such as peekaboo, ride a cock-horse, and other interactions that depend on rhyming and/ or repetition in the same way (Bruner 1983), because all depend on the use and exchange of language, or language as an ‘anticipatory device’ (eg. Round and round the garden).

It is interesting that a particular way of talking to babies is not a taught skill but is a culturally learned behaviour and one that, even in this technological society, continues to dominate early interactions (Brice Heath 1983; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). The most self-conscious parent is driven by the very appearance and nature of babies to converse and communicate in ways that have been used in families for generations (Gopnik et al 1999). Bruner’s suggestion, that mothers and carers together create patterns of interaction, co-constructing their own ‘little worlds’ (Bruner 1986), is a reminder that even the way we think (cognition) is ‘encultured’ (Hilton 1996), and that babies learn how to behave in a particular social setting in collusion with the adults and siblings around them. The world of the family is the first cultural contact a baby encounters and the family members and carers who surround a babies, help them to understand and develop the individual roles each needs to play to become part of the drama of family life (Bruner 1983; 1986; Dunn 1988; Gopnik et al 2001).
The Framework *Birth to Three Matters* sums up the key development points for the component *Being Together* as follows:-

- Young babies are sociable from birth, using a variety of ways to gain attention.
- Babies make social contact according to their physical possibilities.
- Young children form friendships and can be caring towards each other.
- Children learn social skills and enjoy being and talking with adults and other children.

The implications of the research findings which lead to the above statements about babies and young children as skilful communicators and the importance of being together are primarily that they need relaxed, playful and loving conversations right from birth. Additionally, parents need reassurance that talking with their babies will foster their language development so that by the time they are in their third year they will be expert at taking turns and social interactions which include talk. From as early as possible, it is important to observe, note and discuss with parents any apparent constraints on a child’s ability to develop speech due to impairments in the physical or nervous system, so that help can be sought.

Some of the other key messages for practice are that babies need and/or seem to enjoy:-
- responsive and encouraging interactions
- turn-taking patterns of interaction
- motherese, rhyming games, singing and word play
- not too much background noise (eg. from television).

**Finding a voice**

The early sounds that babies make are often thought to be merely a mimic of the constantly repeated sounds that adults make to them. Imitation, though, is a highly sophisticated skill and certainly Vygotsky maintained that it is more than a simple mechanical activity, as we pointed out in chapter 2. He argued that ‘to imitate, it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new’ (Vygotsky 1986: 187). But as Meltzoff (1988) claims that this ability to imitate, demonstrated in his protruding tongue experiments with babies who respond similarly, can even be seen in newborns, we can assume that imitation forms one aspect of language acquisition. It is not, however, the whole story, because babies and young children do not simply mimic what they hear. The actually create language, and practitioners and parents will be familiar with very clever instances, such as the rule-bound addition of ‘-ed’ to form a past participle, instead of the form for an irregular verb – for example, ‘I goed’ instead of ‘I went’. Chomsky’s (1965) contribution to this debate, with the idea that infants are born ‘prewired’ for language was essential (see chapter 2). But Bruner and other researchers have argued that language is embedded in the social and emotional interactions of babies’ lives and that the laws governing their
acquisition of language are the same as those governing other aspects of learning.

So babies are born into families, communities and cultures as attentive, curious learners and their brains are already fine-tuned to attend to sounds around them and process them as part of their developing understanding of the worlds in which they find themselves. Because traditionally most carers of young babies have been mothers, the nature of the cooing and babbling that goes on between adult and child has been called ‘motherese’. Cooing usually starts at around the three month stage (Karmiloff-Smith 1994) and the response of the adult (in England this is usually the mother) can act as a ‘reward’ encouraging these early attempts at sound making and interaction. Only a few months later babbling - repeating the same sound over and over as practice - begins to proliferate in babies’ behaviour, often when they are alone. All babies babble, even those with severe hearing losses, and even when they are getting no reinforcement other than the sound of their own efforts.

In an early study by the Newsons of children and toys, mothers were described as their babies’ first toys, their first playthings, as mothers interact with their children in playful spoken and physical ways (Newson and Newson 1979). When both playing and offering spoken interchanges during daily routines, nappy changes, washing, etc, Stern says that mothers intuitively treat their babies ‘as the people they are about to become by working in their zone of proximal development’ (Stern 1985:43). The study by Gordon Wells in Bristol described the language between children and their mothers in home contexts as being crucial to the child’s construction of their ‘internal model of the world’ (Wells 1987: 35). He claims that babies have an ‘inherent sociability’ that is essential for language development; that is, they show an interest in faces and human sounds from the outset and mothers, or regular care-givers, are able to tune into this interest and join with babies in what seems to be ‘conversation’. Gopnik and her colleagues describe these wordless conversation involving cooing and motherese as responses to the baby ‘flirting’, almost as if the adult and child are engaged in an ‘intricate dance’ (Gopnik et al 1999). Indeed the intimacy of these conversations is almost irresistible to most adults who invariably warm to babies’ responses to their attentions. The success of such interactions and interchanges depends on the sensitivity of the adult to the tunes and rhythms of the baby as they begin to laugh and ‘talk’ in turn.

Kuhl et al (1992) explain that one can observe an awareness of patterns of phonetic perception in newborn infants, which are similar, regardless of the linguistic context into which they are born. They can pick out differences between the phonetic units of many different languages, including languages they have never heard. This shows that there are innate factors which strongly influence the perception of human speech (Kuhl et al 1992).
These researchers go on to discuss the fact that adults are limited in the sounds they are able to perceive, whereas babies are open and show a perception to speech sounds that is universal. Kuhl et al’s (1992) research indicated that by six months of age, well before they acquire language and can understand word meanings, babies’ perception of the sounds used in the languages they hear around them have influenced what they are sensitive to/ perceive. They tested 32 American and 32 Swedish babies and found a ‘magnet effect’ to home language (just as the French babies were more excited on hearing French than either Russian or English in example cited earlier). The researchers interpret this as meaning that the speech babies hear in their first six months forms a basis for learning language, words and their meanings and that the ability to perceive (as important) and to mimic sounds in babble closes down to encompass only familiar speech patterns and sounds. It is also the case that by 12 months old, babies babble only in the language sounds they have been hearing around them. Kuhl et al (1992) point out that this evidence also means that there seem to be phonetic prototypes (models of language and how it sounds, even before language is understood or spoken) that are ‘fundamental perceptual-cognitive building blocks rather than by-products of language acquisition’ (Kuhl et al 1992: 608). This highlights the links between language experience and cognitive development. It also alerts us to the fact that being spoken to, sung to and hearing language patterns clearly, without background interference such as television to interfere with hearing the sounds, is very important right from birth.

In a study researching the effects of overcrowded homes (Evans et al 1999) found parents living in such conditions are less responsive than those not living in crowded conditions but having the same socio-economic status. In crowded homes parents would use less complex language to their children. The researchers suggest this finding may provide some explanation for the delays in cognition found among children from overcrowded homes.

Markus et al (2000) carried out a longitudinal study of 21 babies and their parents. They found that language at 18 months was related to differences in earlier infant-care-giver joint attention episodes – the frequency, quality, responsiveness and duration of such episodes. They also report a link between this finding at 18 months and the children’s scores on both the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories and Bayley Scales of Infant Development at 21 and 24 months of age. In other words, the more babies experience shared talk and activity, the more articulate they are as young talkers.

In another project, with babies aged between two and six months, Kokkinaki and Kugiumutzakis (2000) explored the interactions of 15 babies in Crete with their mothers and with their fathers. They found no differences in the infants’
vocal imitations of either parent in terms of frequency, pauses, total duration of the interactions, but there were differences in the nature of some of the sounds imitated. In interactions with their fathers, both girls and boys of around two years old tend to use more directives, whereas with their mothers they use more expressions about their reactions to objects and events (Marcos 1995), indicating the ways in which, by the age of two, children will use language differently with different people and to achieve various effects.

Marian Whitehead (1999) explains how first words are often only meaningful to those familiar with the particular child’s life and likes or dislikes, and within the contexts in which they are used. Alone in the car with Coralie, then 12 months, her grandmother could not understand her repeated utterances of ‘Medic, medic’ until Coralie pointed to the car’s cassette player and, with much joint laughter, ‘Silly Nana’ turned on appropriate music. Whitehead’s (1996: 12) explanations continue with a helpful outline of the ‘golden age of grammar’ and how children between two and four years will ‘attempt to tidy up irregular plurals’, regularise irregular past tenses, and create new words. Further, she points out that ‘By the age of four the physical maturity of the nervous system and the finer muscle control over the mouth, throat and tongue, and even the presence of teeth, make the young child’s pronunciation of languages very much closer to the adult forms and easier to understand.’ Whitehead (1996: 13).

Further research, which once again draws attention to the holistic and interwoven nature of early development and learning, by Hirose and Barnard (1997), provides evidence of a link between baby boys' cognitive development (measured on the Bayley MDI scale) and the amount of joint verbal interactions they experienced with their mothers. This finding was part of a study examining the potential differences between depressed and non-depressed mothers and their babies. The group of depressed mothers talked more with girls than with boy babies, whereas in the control group there were no such differences. Murray et al (1996) also found relationships between the quality of maternal communication with their babies in the first 18 months. Depressed mothers were less focused on their babies’ experience and less likely to encourage or even acknowledge the child’s agency (growing personhood and attempts to be independent, develop a self-concept – see chapters 3 and 6) than non-depressed mothers. Again, the quality of the mother’s interactions was found to impact on cognitive development. Work by Molfese et al (1996) found associations between perinatal risk (see chapter 1 section on poverty) and language development, which have implications for the use of materials for testing very young children’s progress. They argue that professionals should check scores on a variety of individual sections of assessment scales rather than the final summed predictors only. What is particularly important about this issue is the fact that in general boys’ language development can be slower than that of girls (Hutt 1972). This is
said to relate to the relative immaturity of the male central nervous system at birth and it has consequences for both girls and boys. Firstly, boys may be assessed as being less able, when in fact they may be concentrating on other modes of exploration and discovery; it may also mean that adults provide girls with explanations for events and phenomena, instead of encouraging them to explore first hand through play. Of course, there will be exceptions, boys whose language develops rapidly and girls who are interested in other forms of exploration and it may depend on the extent to which a society expects such differences.

The component of the Framework headed *Finding a Voice* provides the following key developmental guidelines:-

- Young babies communicate in a variety of ways including crying, gurgling, babbling and squealing.
- Babies enjoy experimenting, exploring and using sounds and words to represent objects around them.
- Young children use single word and two word utterances to convey simple and more complex messages.
- Children use language as a powerful means of widening contacts, sharing feelings, experiences and thoughts.

**Bilingualism**

According to Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke’s (2000: 30) review of research on bilingualism, there are many advantages to being exposed to more than one language from birth. These include: ‘self-esteem, positive identity and attitudes towards language learning, cognitive flexibility, increased problem-solving and a greater metalinguistic awareness.’ Further, these researchers tell us that where children are ‘sequentially’ bilingual (learn their second language later, say at a nursery) it is important they have opportunities to carry on developing their home language because it is the strength of this that provides the basis for the additional language.

In her highly informative chapter on *Young bilinguals*, Whitehead (1996) synthesises research findings with professional and personal experience to provide information about bilingualism with pointers for practice. She states that language mixing in the early years is not an indicator of ‘muddle and inadequacy’ but of children making choices about how to express themselves most fluently. She continues: ‘It is absolutely essential that early years carers and educators respect the languages of the young children for whom they are responsible. This must go deeper than vague goodwill or tolerance.’ (Whitehead 1996: 21)

It is also important for babies and children to feel their home languages are valued and reflected in their ECEC settings, and that their ties with family members are promoted. Linda Thompson (1999) found that none of the bilingual children involved in her study in the North East of England, were
using Mirpuri-Panjabi, their first language, at nursery by the time they had completed their first term. This is a pity because we know that young children (and many adults) think in their first language and they need to use this in the early years as they explore and learn about the people and world around them most effectively. Clarke (1999) and Parke and Drury (2001) emphasise the need for nurseries to provide some language teaching (that is, to plan some interactions with young bilingual children and intervene in play to effect these) rather than simply relying on the ad hoc interactions the children may have in the language which is additional for them.

Signing as first language

Babies born with a severe hearing loss will use the part of their brain used for language in hearing babies and adults to extend the part generally used for vision (Karmiloff-Smith 1994). Similarly, a congenitally blind baby will devote a greater part of the brain to touch, the part for sight being reduced. In this way each of them develops a more sophisticated ability in the senses which are strong. Karmiloff-Smith (1994) adds that in both cases it is language that is being processed, one through sensory input through the ears, the other through the eyes. She points out that this is evidence of the brain’s plasticity.

At around 12 months, when hearing babies’ babble begins to sound like sentences, deaf babies will stop babbling. In homes where parents and carers sign, they do so in a signing type of ‘motherese’, making more exaggerated actions for the baby to decipher and learn. Deaf children whose parents use signing as their first language at home go through all the same stages as hearing children using spoken language. In this way, ‘deaf children acquire their native language as naturally as any hearing child learns to speak. Likewise, hearing children of one deaf parent and one hearing parent grow up bilingual, in much the same way and with the same ease as children learning two native spoken languages’ (Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith 2001: 183). Further, research has shown how a child learning sign language begins to move from single signs to combinations at about the same time hearing children begin to use combinations of words (Barrett 1999).

Although a controversial view, Hornby et al (1997) argue that subsequent development should include exposure to sign language. The importance of this to developing the language, rather than speech, of a severely or profoundly deaf child has been established in the last three decades. These researchers suggest that failure to introduce sign as part of a total communication approach can compromise the future ability of a child with a hearing impairment to understand the deeper meaning of language, to read and to write competently.

Coupe and Goldbart (1988) and Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001) provide useful accounts of other types of young children’s language delays, which families may encounter.

What we must recognise is the amazing potential of young children to overcome sensory impairments and, with appropriate scaffolding by parents, grandparents and practitioners, to make sense of their worlds.

Sean was still only two when he recounted to his grandfather that he had been making cakes with his grandmother. The detail of his account indicated not only his ability to remember the sequence and process of the baking, but to enjoy a joke by signing that they had used flour not flower.

**Listening and Responding**

If, as Britton (1970) claimed, language learning begins with listening, then children who are surrounded by talk and engaged in talk interchanges are in an ideal position to develop as language users. The utterances they make however may not necessarily be matched in time and context to what has been heard. Indeed, as children develop and overhear language used in different contexts they are storing words to fit with experiences and to use in their own time. Children are most likely to learn words when ‘they are not pressed, or otherwise expected to reply, as in a conversation’ (Bloom et al 1996:3171). Difficulties arise when children are directed to answer questions or respond at a particular time when often the making and shaping of a response then restricts the language used. Vygotsky (1978) argued that development and instruction have different ‘rhythms’, although they may be closely connected. And from their research, Bloom and colleagues discovered that the ‘language a child brings to a conversation is language already learned from what has been heard and overheard in a multitude of actions and interactions that have come before’ (Bloom et al 1996:3171). The implication of these findings for adults is that they need to be good listeners too –

> ‘Whether it involves children, babies or adults, interpersonal communication is a two way process...Listening to children shows our respect for them and builds their self esteem.’ Petrie (1997: 25).

In Ruth Weir’s seminal study of ‘crib talk’, she gathered evidence of sound play in children’s pre-sleep monologues (Weir 1962). While in Meek’s work, replicating this with her students, she discovered that very young children were experimenting with intonation in such pre-sleep talk, when ‘variations of tone, pitch and stress were greatly exaggerated as they practised and repeated segments of language ... pushing the tonal range ever farther as they did so’ (Meek 1985:45). Of course such monologues can only occur if language is first modelled and heard, and then gathered and stored, to be played with and rehearsed in safe spaces. Fenton and Martello’s close examination of bath time talk offers similar exploratory opportunities when, as
well as functional bath time business talk occurs, so too does play, playful interchange, teasing and joking between siblings and/or adults (Fenton and Martello 1996).

Stern maintained that by the time that children reach the age of about 9 months the beginning of jokes and teasing occurs and from 15 months onwards play and language become possible (Stern 1985; see also Dunn 1988). Children have begun by this age to understand some of the social interactions that are occurring around them and, as they become ‘wordsmiths’ (Meek 1985), so then do they begin also to take pleasure in nonsense, using and subverting sounds to make fun, upend convention and provide humour for themselves and willing adult audiences and participants (Grainger and Gooch 1999). In discussion of Michael Rosen’s work with children and poetry, Meek voices Rosen’s claim that ‘children, discovering language and playing with it, meet its physical nature before its sense’ (Meek 2000: 203). Certainly the rhythm and rhyme that very young children delight it would be testimony to this and nursery rhymes, skipping rhymes and playground songs and games are still very much in evidence, and often consistent in content over generations. (Opie and Opie 1959; Grugeon 1999).

When cousins Richard (4) and Ceris (5) were urged by their beloved grandmother to put on some ‘woollies’ against the cold, their delight in this newfound and enjoyable sounding word (their parents called them sweaters and cardigans) was displayed in a joint romp with much laughter and falling about, accompanied by repetitions of ‘Woolly, woolly, woolly’. Davies (2002) writes of similar examples of toddlers using dance-like movements accompanying the relishing and rhythms of newfound words.

The rich range of sounds, language patterns, dramas and tunes of family life form the fodder on which the curiosities of babies and young children feed as they begin their language journeys, since language acquisition requires a safe and familiar ‘space’ of words, conversations, rhymes and songs.

The key developmental notes included in the Framework Birth to Three Matters for Listening and Responding are:-

- Long before young babies can communicate verbally, they listen to, distinguish and respond to intonations in adults’ voices.
- In a familiar context, with a key person, babies can understand and respond to the different things said to them.
- Young children are able to respond to simple requests and grasp meaning from context.
- Children learn new words very rapidly and are able to use them in talking about matters which interest them.

So parents and practitioners need time to listen to and enjoy the sounds and language of babies and toddlers when they are secure and comfortable,
perhaps in their cots/ beds, or playing in a familiar setting. Throughout these early years, adults need to engage in rhythmic songs, dances and finger plays, and share picture books, especially those with repetitive, lyrical words and to provide for meaningful fantasy play (Martin and Dombey 2002). They also need to show they too relish particular words and phrases, sometimes using hand and arm movements, as well as facial expressions and expressive intonation, to help children understand meanings.

‘Children are enthusiastic to struggle to make meaning of adults’ communications and they need to encounter adults who are equally enthusiastic to make meaning of their communication.’ Elfer et al (2002 draft version: 15).

Making Meaning

‘Social realities are not bricks that we trip over or bruise ourselves on when we kick at them, but the meanings that we achieve by the sharing of human cognitions.’ (Bruner 1986: 122).

The close physical and emotional bond that exists between mother and child in the earliest days of a baby’s life enable her often to interpret the nature of the baby’s cry, its purpose and need (see chapter 3). As the relationship develops and feeding and sleeping routines are negotiated and patterned, each learns something about the roles and rituals involved in family life and the baby is initiated into family culture (Bruner 1986). Indeed, from birth, Stern tells us that babies often occupy a state called ‘alert inactivity’ when they are quiet but taking in events around them (Stern 1985:39). The first recorded smile of a baby is always an event of celebration and joy and although it is claimed that the first social smiling emerges by 2 months of age (Rochat et al 1999), smiles and open-mouthed responses have been anecdotally recorded before that age. However, the smile is a signpost, at whatever age, that the baby is now able to engage in a new way as ‘when infants start to smile in response to social stimulation, there is an apparent change in the way they relate to the world’ and the nature of the adult response becomes sensitive to the appearance of smiles, as ‘on the basis of the expression of reciprocal pleasure, interactions are fine-tuned’ (Rochat et al 1999: 950). Thus, smiling seems to signal the beginning of identifiable and intentional meaning making. The second physical development that appears to change the position of the baby from being a recipient or second partner in meaning making into an active constructor and communicator of meaning is gesture. Reaching towards faces or moving objects occurs in the early months before a baby can position her/himself by ‘crawling or cruising’, in order to explore or capture objects or people, or discover alternative perspectives (Stern 1985). In fact it is possible to claim from the work of Stern and others that pointing may originate from reaching and so a communicative gesture is created.

The development of language, a symbolic method of referring and the way in which we are distinct from other animals, is a milestone in life, as each child
learns how ‘to mean’ within the family context (Bruner 1986) and the process of ‘enculturation’ really begins. Given opportunities, children under three will also use other ways of expressing themselves through movement and dance, singing and other expressive arts (Davies 2002; Duffy 1998; Edwards et al 1998; and see chapter 5). But it is mainly through language that a young child is enabled to begin to construct the story, or narrative, of her/his own life (Stern 1985) and such narratives, constructions and reconstructions help children to develop their sense of self, their sense of the social worlds around them, and their place within these worlds (Bruner 1986). As well as this, we learn how to ‘behave linguistically’ (Halliday 1978) from the auditory processing that occurs before birth and continues through life.

Thus, learning how to mean and to make meaning draws on this specialised knowledge, developed in the womb and progressing as the child ‘processes the sounds, rhythms and basic building blocks of the words and grammar of his mother tongue’ (Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith 2001: vii). In this respect Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith stress the difference between speech and language. Babies are actively processing sounds they hear a long time before they understand words or grammar. They are becoming sensitive to key aspects of the language/s they hear around them. As Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001) explain, research has shown that the capacity for speech perception of a foetus, newborn, or very young infant is impressive. But we should not confuse speech perception with language. Sometimes speech discrimination capacities in babies have led theorists to conclude that humans are born with ‘language’. However, there is much more to language learning than the ability to appropriately segment a stream of speech.

Traditionally, from the work of Bruner (1986) and Wells (1986) and others, we have come to see parents, carers or adults as leaders and scaffolders of language use and conversation. However the research of Bloom and colleagues, when observing and recording children from nine months onwards, indicates that children are often the initiators, leaders and directors of talk events and conversations, determining and shaping the content, length and nature of the talk. They say that ‘both child and mother contributed to the architecture of the early conversations between them, but in fact it was the children who were “in charge”’. (Bloom et al 1996:3171; our italics). Those of us who have either lived or worked with babies and young children would support this view from experience of being led into conversations, or indeed corners, by young developing conversationalists, often in public spaces! And, as opportunities for satisfying curiosity arise, the questions of young children, as developing philosophers, are often unanswerable, for example ‘Where were you when the sun was built?’ (Coles 1996). The child as ‘director’ of play or conversation is only possible if a sensitive relationship is evident between the child and adult (Garvey 1984). Singer claims that the child learns to ‘read’ her/his mother’s face and that equally the mother, as the more experienced other, attributes certain meanings to the infant’s diffuse
movements. She mirrors and imitates her child, interpreting her child's movements as communication cues that suggest some joint course of action (Singer 2001). This reciprocity, or mirrored language, actions, gestures or expressions, develops ably into shared understandings as games, play, teasing and word play become part of daily interaction.

Play of course soon becomes the contextual space where meaning is made and negotiated as children develop ways of interacting with toys, space and ‘others’ to construct and reconstruct worlds. As children attempt to make sense of their lives through play, stories are told, narratives are constructed (see chapter 3). Rosen claims that ‘we can locate narrative in human actions and the events which surround them and in our capacity to perceive the world as consisting of actions and events sequentially ordered’ (Rosen 1988: 13) and as children recreate the roles of those around them, such narratives are constructed in often the simplest forms, using basic resources and barely indicative language and gesture. Meek offers the view that ‘in their own versions of stories children explore intellectually the nature of their own situation – childhood ...and as they learn to become both the teller and the told, they are also learning to dialogue with their futures’ (Meek 1998: 118). These lessons are best learned from the stories heard, shared, discussed and loved in the company of parents, adults and others who are prepared to suspend reality and join with children in risky journeys of the imagination, to land (always safely), like Max in Sendak’s classic tale, Where the Wild Things Are, back home, where his supper is waiting and still hot!

It is also important to be aware that during play children ‘can say all they know in any way they like’ (Meek 1985: 49) and often this means that the boundaries of convention and appropriateness are often challenged and extended, in terms of both language and physical behaviour. The boundaries in play contexts are, by the very nature of play, broad and fluid, although rules may exist, linguistic or physical. They are defined and negotiated by the players, and are often renegotiated during the drama of play. The very early communications between adults and babies that often include turn taking and the beginnings of conversation may be important in defining appropriateness and, later, the development of ‘early morality’ as very often ‘as a result of face-to-face turn-taking behaviour with care-givers, infants learn rules for reciprocity, for give and take, together with the strong motive for using these rules: “together” is so pleasurable’ (Singer 2001: 4), (see also Bråten 1996; De Haan and Singer 2001; Singer 1998). Singer maintains that such behaviour is ‘based on a strong motivation to share and to connect, and to construct shared rules’ (Singer 2001: 4).

It is important to remember, however, as we discuss in chapter 5, that this kind of involvement in joint play, which requires sharing imagination and communicating freely, is extremely limited by the cognitive processes of children with autism (Hobson 1993; Trevarthen et al 1998).
The role of siblings in supporting babies and young children in developing and shaping meaning is significant (Dunn 1984; 1993). In her research (although with older children, still important in this context), Gregory describes the potential for ‘synergy’ between siblings, as they play together with younger children, imitating, repeating, echoing, listening, challenging, etc. But older children are also learning, through ‘practising consciously what they know and through translating official meanings into personal sense and vice versa for the younger child’ (Gregory 2001:313). The relationships here are described as generally equal and the mutuality of the learning opportunities is celebrated. This ‘personal sense’ develops in families, communities and cultures and it is through developing such knowledge and knowledge of language, from exposure to the cues given by more knowledgeable others and the ‘models’ they offer, that young children learn how ‘to mean’, how to make sense of what goes on around them in their home ‘world’ (Bruner 1986).

Making meaning and print literacy with under threes
During the years before they are five or six, children in England are gathering and making sense of information about the literacy-dependent society in which they live (David et al 2000). Campbell (1999) provides a powerful, in-depth account of his granddaughter Alice’s very early experiences with print literacy. Alice’s mutual enjoyment of books with her parents and grandparents displays a uniqueness about the path a child takes to becoming an effective language user and sharer in literate aspects of everyday life. During these years the most important aspects of engaging young children in activities involving literacy need to be aimed at enabling them to acquire the ‘big picture’, to understand how literacy works, how books work, and so on, and not to put them into meaningless situations where they are expected to decode symbols, other than their own mark making when they wish to convey messages (David et al 2000) (and see chapter 5). As Macrory (2001) argues, practitioners need to understand about individual variation in language acquisition and not simply the generalisations from large-scale research. By observing young children at play, practitioners can listen and note individual differences. Further, Macrory emphasises that young children need to play rather than to be made to engage in too great or too early a focus on formal literacy activity, adding that formal literacy instruction may be to the detriment of their development of spoken language. Apart from wasting the children’s time if they do not understand what is going on, the language adults use to discuss literacy is sometimes beyond the experience of such young children and can simply leave them feeling inadequate. Adults will frequently focus on their own questions and meanings rather than recognising the sense in a child’s response. This sense in responding is well illustrated by Coralie, aged 2, looking at a book with her mother. Near the picture of an apple a large ‘a’ had been printed. She asked about the ‘a’ and so her mother tried to explain. As she ended the explanation Coralie’s mother asked, ‘So if apple begins with
‘a’ (sounded), what does orange begin with?’ To which Coralie replied ‘Peeling.’ A brilliant, logical answer to a ‘question too far’.

Programmes devised by researchers such as Wade and Moore (1993; 1996; 2000) and Hannon et al (1991) focus on the loving and sharing of books as sources of inspiration and enjoyment from very early in life. Their studies have highlighted the crucial role of the adults – parents and carers – in developing children’s abilities coincidentally while enjoying books together. Wade and Moore followed up the participants in their Bookstart programme, in which parents were supplied with and encouraged to enjoy books with their very young children. They found that the children involved in the project had scores in both Baseline Assessments and Key Stage 1 assessments which were superior to those of their matched controls who had not been enrolled in the Bookstart scheme. The children outperformed their peers in not only English but also in Mathematics and Science. Wade and Moore suggest that sharing books at home in the early years may contribute to children’s ability to attend and concentrate. The evaluation of the PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership) programme, another project which encourages parents to share books with their children from a very early age, is already showing differences in the reading abilities of the children at school, following their own and their parents’ involvement in PEEP (Evangelou and Sylva 2002).

Nowadays young children ‘make sense’ of their print dependent society through meaning making involving a range of media (Westbrook 1999). Sam (one of premature twin boys aged 15 months) was enthralled to be dressed in his older brother’s ‘hand-me-down’ Postman Pat pyjamas instead of a baby’s sleep suit. For the next few days he repeatedly brought Postman Pat books from among their collection to his mother, to delight in and share the pictures and have her tell the stories (abridged versions of the text where the print proved too long), and he wanted to watch their Postman Pat video.

Summary of key ‘messages’
Human beings communicate in numerous ways. Language is said to form only a small percentage of interaction. Children are keen observers of all forms of communication, both in order to make sense of what is going on and to be able to participate. Practitioners need to reflect on their observations of the children’s communications and their own ability to make these possible for all children, and particularly those who might be silenced because they are not being encouraged to use their first language or because they have a hearing loss.

In the Birth to Three Matters pack, the card of the Framework Component Making Meaning provides the following essential points about how babies and children strive to convey and interpret meanings as skilful communicators.

- From the very beginning of life, young babies convey messages about what they want and need, as well as how they feel.