

# *Talking and Learning with Young Children*



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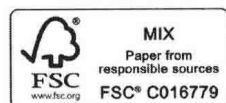
SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
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Editor: Amy Jarrold  
Assistant editor: George Knowles  
Production editor: Nicola Marshall  
Proofreader: Thea Watson  
Indexer: Silvia Benvenuto  
Marketing manager: Dilhara Attygalle  
Cover design: Wendy Scott  
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in India at Replika Press Pvt Ltd



© Michael Jones 2016

First published 2016

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2015935347**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-1239-7

ISBN 978-1-4739-1240-3 (pbk)

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For Andreas, Eva, Dani, Brendan, Savash, Ayaan, Jasmine,  
Jayden, Ibrahim and Layla. And for Rachel.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Jones has worked as a speech and language therapist, as a teacher in primary and special schools and as an advisory teacher for children with speech and language difficulties. He led the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project in three areas of the UK.

Michael currently provides training internationally and publishes widely on the subject of early language development.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Mary Field, Kelly Yuen, Katja O'Neill, Judith Twani, Lisa Pepper, Sam Randall, Steve Grocott, Debbie Brace, Bhavna Acharya, Dee Gent, Sally Roberts, Lucy Jenkins, Trevor Stevens, Edmund Gentle, Maggie Harris, Catherine Croft, Kathy Brodie, Emma Huxter, Jay Begum and Mine Conkbayir.

Thanks to Chapel Street Nursery School, Luton and The Rainbow Centre, RAF Marham for the cover photographs.

Special thanks must go to Sue Thomas, Sadie Thornton and Tina Cook, who co-led the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) projects with me in Luton, Bedford Borough and Thurrock. Along with the many practitioners in the settings who were involved in these projects, they provided me with so many ideas, insights and inspiration. Jeni Riley gave me hours of her time, in person and via the phone and email, with inspirational discussion and support with this book. And to Amy Jarrold and George Knowles at Sage for expertly steering me through the whole process.

And to Professor Hazel Dewart, sadly no longer with us, who showed me that the study of child development can be an intellectual activity, a deeply emotional experience and sometimes highly entertaining!



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# INTRODUCTION: TALKING SUCCESSFULLY WITH CHILDREN

## What is this book about?

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This book explores how children learn to communicate using language, how they use language to learn and the role of adults in the process. From the moment they are born, children use a powerful inner force for communicating and a drive to make sense of their environment and the people in it. If adults show the child love, affection and involve him in the right type of early interaction, spoken language emerges that the child can use to communicate ideas. With continued adult support, most children by the age of three-and-a-half have an almost complete set of communication, language and speech skills. This book focuses on how children learn language within the context of social relationships: initially with their parents and other family members, then later with professional adults who assist in their language development and learning within early years settings, and with other children.

We examine how adults help children learn by involving them in positive interactions, meaningful conversation and by helping them play, explore and talk with each other. Every child's experience is different, so we look closely at how adults help children from diverse backgrounds,

including those with additional learning needs, to develop the language and the confidence to communicate that they will need to achieve well in school and build positive relationships throughout life. There are many examples of practical strategies and activities that come from my experience in working with young children, families and practitioners, and from my involvement in the England-wide Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project.

### **Who is this book for?**

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This book will be valuable for students and those already working with young children, including those in leadership and advisory roles. It aims to inspire students and practitioners to develop their skills when talking with children, to influence how adults plan for talk in their settings and to give an insight into how language develops in the home.

### **How the book is structured**

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Early chapters link key research findings with successful practice, using examples of children and adults talking and learning together. Later chapters focus on case studies of successful approaches that support language and learning in early years settings. Points for reflection and discussion and practical tasks help the reader reflect on the implications of research findings for pedagogy and daily practice with children. Each chapter concludes with suggestions for further reading in research and practical approaches. Words in italics throughout the text are technical terms specific to the study of language and child development, and are explained in the Glossary.

### **A note about terminology and children's ages**

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Throughout the book, professionals working with children are referred to as 'practitioners'. The establishments that children attend are referred to as 'settings'. Day nurseries and childminders are described as providing 'childcare', in recognition that children will often spend most of their day in these settings. The term 'early years' is used to refer to children's chronological age from birth to five years. Children's ages are described in years and months; e.g. a child aged three years and four months will be 3;4. Children are referred to as either 'he' or 'she'.

## Learning a language and introducing some more terminology

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There are many ways that human beings communicate messages face to face, with talking being the most widely used. *Communication* is the way that people convey messages to each other, including talking, using gestures and sign language. *Verbal communication* involves what is understood by the speaker and the listener (*verbal comprehension*), and how they talk with each other (*verbal expression*). Our *interaction* with other people, how we respond to each other while communicating, may involve *conversation*. Conversation is a series of turns, where each speaker has a chance to participate in sharing messages.

When communicating with babies or children who are in the early stages of developing language, we focus on the interaction between child and adult. As language emerges, we tend to look closely at how we use words, i.e. our conversation. However, underlying all of our communication with children is a belief that our interaction should be as positive as possible. By using the word 'positive', I assume that we are using language to support children to enjoy communicating, so that we can build their enjoyment of talking for pleasure as well as a way to learn.

Let's imagine that we are learning Japanese by visiting Japan and being immersed in the language, with little or no help from anyone who speaks English. Talking successfully with a Japanese person can only happen if we both have an understanding of spoken *language*, i.e. how we use verbal symbols to express a meaning. As well as knowing that we are being spoken to in Japanese, as opposed to, say, Vietnamese or Thai, we need to understand how individual *speech* sounds are used in that particular language to make up words, i.e. the phonological system. We need to know when one word ends and another begins, and to link words that are spoken to the objects, people or ideas that they relate to.

Every language has thousands of *vocabulary* items, including nouns, verbs and adjectives. At the very beginning, it is fine to use vocabulary items singly, but this will only allow us to communicate very basic ideas. At this stage, we will rely very heavily on our understanding of *non-verbal communication*, including understanding the other person's gestures. If we really want to understand the true message behind the words that are being used, it is essential to be able to read the messages that are being conveyed by the speaker's facial expression and, crucially, tone of voice, which indicates how the speaker is feeling. We need to know the rules of how words are linked together, including word order, to convey ideas such as when something happened, to whom and why. Broadly speaking, we can refer to this as *grammar*. To really understand ideas, we need to have experience. For example, you can't possibly understand what a Japanese person

is saying about the Japanese Tea Ceremony unless you have experienced it, ideally in real life or at least from pictures or film.

We need to know all that in order to understand someone else. To make ourselves understood, we would need to know how to pronounce individual Japanese speech sounds and how to put them together in words. At exactly the same time we would need to know how to convey our meaning (*semantics*), including linking the words together in an agreed way, using accurate Japanese grammar. You have to know what you are talking about and constantly check your Japanese listener's face to literally see if he understands. If he doesn't understand, then you need to have the skills to use more basic non-verbal communication, such as gestures. This is the all important use of *pragmatics*, where we use different ways to convey our message. When you have done all that, then you have successfully asked about the toilet and understand where to find it!

If that sounds like hard work, then let's think about miracles. Children are little miracles, because they will have all of these skills by the time they are three years old. What is even more miraculous is that they will have learned all this without anyone sitting down with the specific aim of teaching them how to talk. All this understanding and expression will have been learned naturally through talking with other people, and particularly with adults. This learning journey starts at home and continues in childcare, pre-school and school. It is a truly amazing achievement.

So let's start as we intend to go on: with children talking.

### Adam, Lucy, Michael and the bananas

On a visit to a busy nursery school, I was involved in a fascinating conversation with two three-and-a-half-year-old children. They were sitting at the snack table, peeling a banana each and chopping it up. I had never met the children before, but as a visiting advisor I had been invited to join the children at the snack table and 'have a chat' with them as they prepared their food, ate it and then cleared the table. I am indicated as MJ.

Adam

(to Michael): Do you like toriander? (Coriander.)

Michael: Yes I do.

Adam: My mummy buys toriander.

Lucy: What's toriander?

Adam: It's dreen and loots lite a plant. (It's green and looks like a plant.)

Lucy: My dad drinks beer.

Adam: My dad don't lite beer. He drints Tote. (Coke.)  
 (To Michael): Do you like nanas?  
 Michael: Yes. I like bananas. I like lots of fruit.  
 Adam: What's truit?  
 Lucy: You know. Pums and stuff like that.  
 Michael: Pums?  
 Lucy: Yes. They are purple and got a stone inside.  
 Michael: Oh plums!  
 Lucy: Yes. Pums.  
 Adam: My lite pums. My mummy don't buy me pums.

This conversation lasted about a minute, but contains the essence of this entire book: that language learning and using language to learn come from having effective interactions within a social setting. These very young children have already achieved an enormous amount in the 36 months since they were born. They are able to ask an adult and each other questions. Adam asks two types of question: for information about my food preferences, checking to see if I like the same as he does; and for clarification about a misunderstood statement. Lucy is an equally sophisticated communicator. She is able to ask another child a question and give a clarification, even though the child she is talking to is not pronouncing all his words clearly.

Both children are still developing their ability to make single speech sounds (*articulation*) in a way that is acceptable in the area where they live (*pronunciation*) and to combine them to make words (*phonology*), with Lucy being ahead of Adam in terms of how intelligible she is. If we chose to analyse this brief exchange in more depth, we would find a wealth of information about both children's phonology. We would note that Adam, for example, is regularly substituting /t/ for /k/. This is not uncommon in children of this age, and does not present a significant obstacle to Adam communicating his message. Lucy, on the other hand, is developing her use of /pl/ initial consonant blends, so that 'plums' become 'pums'. This did briefly impede our understanding, but Lucy's expert description of a plum 'repaired' the conversation, so that the children could bring it to a satisfying conclusion.

These little children are highly sophisticated communicators for the following reasons:

- They are able to engage an unfamiliar adult in conversation
- They can talk in abstract about something that is not there for them to look at and handle

- They can talk in this way while using their hands to do something else (and eat at the same time!)
- They understand how to 'repair' a conversation when it starts to break down because of potential misunderstanding

What is most remarkable about these children is that Adam is being brought up in an Italian-, Hindi- and English-speaking home environment and Lucy's parents only speak French with her at home. What the children say, the ideas that they communicate and how they talk, are the tip of a very large iceberg of communication that has been expanding rapidly over 36 months. However, as practitioners, we will only ever be party to a minute fraction of that talk and communication. This is often because of the nature of daily life in settings, where children are together in large groups with relatively few adults to talk with them in detail.

## The role of the adult

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I was very restrained during this conversation. I made a conscious decision to say as little as possible, to see how the children were able to talk to each other. What I chose to do, and most importantly what not to do, were the crucial factors in determining how this conversation would evolve. The decision to respond simply to Adam's initial question with 'Yes I do' gave him the space to lead the conversation where he wanted it to go, i.e. about what he knew most about: his home life and family relationships. By controlling my automatic adult reaction to probe Adam with questions, I allowed him to maintain the role of leader of the conversation. This encouraged his friend Lucy to enter the conversation as an equal and to contribute information that kept the conversation going.

There can be so much to discover, even in the shortest of conversations! But what I was bursting to find out, after we had finished talking, was why this little boy, who was talking to me for the first time, asked about coriander, when we were involved in cutting up bananas? Why did he know about coriander at all, when most children of his age talk about more well-known foods such as apples and oranges? I was intrigued to find out, so asked the practitioners. It emerged that fresh coriander is a popular ingredient in Indian cooking. Adam is very close to his grandmother, who regularly cooks for him and often adds some chopped coriander onto Adam's food. The previous day, Adam had asked if he could have some coriander on his rice at nursery, which led to a discussion about food, including whether anyone else liked coriander or other types of green-leaf vegetable. This reveals Adam's question to be a logical extension of his own exploration of the whole subject of food, modelled to him by adults in a naturally occurring group discussion the previous day.



But where was the learning in our 'chat'? Both these children made 'errors' of grammar and pronunciation. Wasn't it a wasted opportunity to extend the children's language, particularly bearing in mind their need, as *bilingual* learners, to progress in their ability to understand and speak English? Had I been a student being observed by a tutor or a practitioner being observed by an inspector, I may have been roundly criticised for not capitalising on an important learning opportunity. Granted, by dropping the word 'fruit' into the conversation, I moved onto an interesting subject, before Adam brought it firmly back into the realm of his family. But that was basically it, in terms of my 'teaching' input.

Many practitioners feel under pressure when communicating with children. Pressure develops through the lack of time to have the type of intense, in-depth conversations that they know children need in order to learn. Practitioners also feel under pressure to make every conversation count: to use each opportunity for talk to move children forward in their knowledge and understanding of other curriculum areas, e.g. mathematics. Such a practitioner would have taken control of the conversation, asked more questions and used more complex vocabulary. He might even have used this as an opportunity to improve the children's pronunciation by modelling correct usage. This is laudable, but by behaving in this way it could have denied both children several equally important lessons:

- It is fun to talk for the sake of talking
- People value what I have to say
- I can use language to explore my own ideas
- I talk best when adults listen to me and are interested in what I have to say
- I can compare my life experience with another child
- I am becoming more confident as a talker with adults and with other children
- Other children also have speech that can be unclear at times, but how you talk is not as important as the message you want to convey
- I am learning how to be a good communicator in a social setting
- I am learning how to be a good communicator in a setting where there are several children for every adult
- I am successful as a communicator in another language other than those I speak at home

## The scope of this book

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Adam and Lucy are sophisticated learners. Their journey as language learners is by no means over, but, like most three-and-a-half-year-olds, they have covered most of the ground. They have developed most of the skills that they will need to become successful communicators, including



acquiring the fundamentals of pronunciation and sentence construction: in English and another language. We use the terms 'develop' and 'acquire' advisedly. Theories of language development have evolved over the centuries. Simple notions of imitation developed into behavioural theories of reinforcement by reward. Chomsky's theory that children have a built-in capacity for language acquisition – to create for themselves or 'acquire' the rules of speech and grammar – gives an insight into how humans have an inbuilt drive to learn how to talk. Theories that stress the importance of children developing language to use socially in communication point to the vital role of adults interacting with children: to help them understand the meanings of words and how to use them to talk with other people. The view taken in this book is that all of these theories play a part in explaining children's development as communicators.

We examine in detail how children from birth to 18 months, which can broadly be defined as 'infancy', acquire skills and develop communication through social interaction. Observations of children learning at this age provide us with insights into how most children manage to learn to develop their understanding and expressive language skills so rapidly. This occurs through a combination of children's rapidly developing neurological system (*maturation*), physical growth and intellectual or *cognitive development* and opportunities to explore their immediate world and close relationships. Central to this process is the interaction between infants and their parents and key caregivers. Positive interaction promotes wellbeing and security, as part of the establishment of early relationships. These adults provide the essential experience of many thousands of interactions and play experiences.

Between two and three years of age, we see a rapid increase in children's ability to communicate and understand sophisticated ideas. This growth in communication and learning is linked to children's increasing experience and their drive to explore the wider physical world and the world of ideas. However, not all children welcome being exposed to new and exciting experiences, particularly some two-year-olds, as they move tentatively towards embracing independence, or children with *speech and language delay*, who can find talking with unfamiliar adults and other children very challenging. With children's increasing independence, the adult's role changes from providing total nurture and protection, to encouraging and allowing the child to explore. Language and conversation play a large part in helping the child to make sense of family relationships and the outside world, including the abstract world of stories.

Young children's experience of growing up in families is diverse, and this is reflected in how children communicate and talk. Some children have two parents, some have one. Some are brought up in extended families, while some children spend their early lives away from their natural parents in a number of different care situations. Many young children are exposed to more than one language at home, or speak a language different to the one used in the setting. The biggest influence on how quickly and successfully