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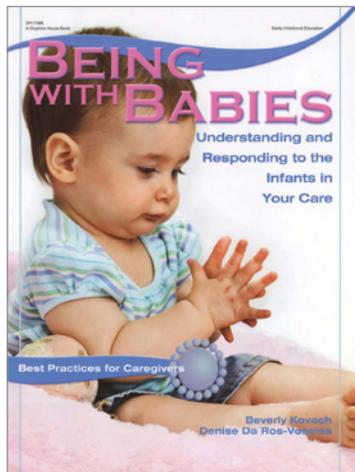
Communicating with Babies

Issue

Your attitudes influence if, when, and how you communicate with babies. You may be unaware of the value of talking to babies directly. Maybe it has not occurred to you to use language to include the babies in communication. When you ignore babies, you tell them they are not valued. When you do not talk to babies, they are unlikely to understand what is happening with them.

Rationale

Talking *about* babies instead of *to* babies discounts them as individuals. Babies need to be part of the communication process. When you communicate with babies, it validates their self-worth. They will also have a better chance to understand what is occurring. Language provides a model for babies about how to communicate, and it serves as a vehicle to convey thoughts and feelings.



Goals

- To acknowledge each baby by name
- To talk directly to each baby about what is happening
- To talk to babies before touching them
- To refrain from talking about babies to others in the baby's presence

How many times have you watched this scene unfold? As you approach two women and a baby, you overhear one woman say, “What a precious baby! Isn’t she cute! How old is she now? Does she sit up yet? Oh! Look at those bright blue eyes.” The woman takes the baby’s hands in hers and in a high-pitched voice exclaims, “Aren’t you the cute one.” She then talks with the mother about her baby.

You may have witnessed this scene countless times. Most adults talk to other adults about the baby in front of the baby. The problem with this is that even though the baby is the focus of the conversation, he or she is being described as if she is not there. Although it’s probably not deliberate on the part of the adult, by not talking directly to the baby, the baby is dis-



qualified on a personal level. Repeated encounters like this tell the baby she is insignificant. Acknowledging and speaking directly to the baby by name tells the baby he or she is respected as an individual. Magda Gerber used to tell the story of how her mentor Emmi Pikler first impressed her. When Dr. Pikler came to Magda’s home to visit her sick child, Dr. Pikler talked to Magda’s daughter using her name and getting information she needed directly from the child. This amazed Magda as it never occurred to her that her young daughter could give the doctor that information (Gerber 1978; Gerber & Johnson 1998). For many adults, it might not occur to them to talk directly to a child, let alone a baby.

It can be difficult to get into the habit of talking with babies. There is

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a vast difference between how babies communicate and how adults communicate. Babies use gestures and babble, which requires close observation. Also, most adults are better talkers than listeners. They are better at giving information than receiving it. Some adults think that babies do not have the ability to learn to comprehend. If you believe that, it's easy to understand why you do not address or talk to babies directly. These differences get in the way of responsive communication between adults and babies.

Repeated social encounters that are rich and spontaneous are what fosters the relationships between babies and caregivers. Relationships are the most important ingredient that fuels the baby and assures the baby's optimum health in his first year of life.

What you believe and think about babies influences how you act. When you evaluate what you think about babies, you may decide it is worthwhile to talk with them. There are approaches to communicate with babies that convey a personal, respectful, and responsive message to them.

Talking to a baby requires you to

- Acknowledge the baby by name.
- Wait for the baby's response.
- Include your observation of the baby's response in your next message.
- Say what you see or think you see and include those responses.

The above suggestions allow you to experience an enriched dialogue with a baby. Sharing information provides more accurate and tuned-in communi-

cation where preferences and choices maintain a sense of who babies are as people.

SCENARIO

Sharon is feeding 14-month-old Allison peas and potatoes for lunch. Allison turns her head away from the spoon of peas after her first taste. Sharon, her caregiver, says, "Allison you don't like the way these peas taste? You turned your head. Does that mean you don't want anymore?" Allison continues to turn away from the peas. "Okay, let's try some potatoes for now." This form of communication shows that the caregiver and the baby both are in tune to each other's behavior and watch each other's responses to continue more accurate communication together.

This way of being together tells the baby her responses are acknowledged and included. Sharon may think peas are good for Allison but does not force Allison to eat them. By talking directly to Allison about what is happening, Allison is heard and respected for her preferences.

Eating peas is less important than the acknowledgement and acceptance of Allison's behavior about her preferences. As behaviors are repeated, Allison and Sharon learn and know more about each other, which develops trust and reliability in a mutually satisfying relationship.

Telling the baby what you are doing together during caregiving times is another important communication issue. Describing your actions with words helps the baby to understand and anticipate your next move. Telling the baby what you are doing together during caregiving times is another important way to communicate.

Maria, the caregiver, began to put on 14-month-old Isabella's sweater to go out doors. Maria showed Isabella the sleeve of the sweater, saying, "I'm going to put your right hand in the sweater." Maria then touched Isabella's right hand, saying, "I'll start here." Isabella was prepared for Maria's signal and attempted to push her right arm through the sleeve of the sweater. Maria's words and actions signaled Isabella about what was going to happen, enabling Isabella to understand and cooperate with Maria.

Telling the baby what you are doing together during caregiving times is another important communication issue.



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Knowing what comes next can reduce anxiety. Telling babies what will happen, showing them the steps along the way, and touching them to give them clues about what is happening is a powerful and wonderful way to give the baby a chance to understand your actions and intentions. These behaviors offer a rich dialogue between you and the baby that is a nice way for the baby to stay involved with you.

A few behaviors that help you give the baby clear messages include the following:

- Calling each baby by his or her name
- Speaking directly to the baby
- Showing the baby the object or item you are focusing on
- Gently touching the body part you want to address
- Waiting to see if the baby will help

- Bending down to the baby's level
- Thanking the baby for his or her cooperation when it occurs

Maria's gentle touch signaled Isabella to participate. Touching gently is a wonderful way to show a tender response while communicating with babies. Touch can give the baby a warning that something is about to happen. A caregiver who gently touches a baby before picking her up by placing her hand on the baby's shoulder gives that baby a beautiful message of respect and appreciation.

There are so many small ways that you can communicate a message of worth to each baby. All you need to do is to stop, appreciate, and believe that your acknowledgment makes a difference. Trying these behaviors provides a valuable form of communication and a time to enjoy each others' company.

A caregiver who gently touches a baby before picking her up by placing her hand on the baby's shoulder gives that baby a beautiful message of respect and appreciation.

Key Point

Each baby needs to be acknowledged personally by name and given the opportunity to communicate. This ensures that babies understand what is happening. It also acknowledges their behavior and personal preferences as important.

Solutions

- Acknowledge each baby by name.
- Let babies know you believe they can contribute to an interaction or a relationship.
- Demonstrate and model to other adults how important it is to acknowledge and include babies in conversations.
- Think about babies' likes and dislikes when you communicate with them.
- Use gentle touch to signal and/or ask for participation.

References

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- Gerber, M., & A. Johnson. 1998. *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to Encourage Your Child's Natural Abilities—From the Very Start*. New York: Wiley.

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