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Ten minute bonding test for mothers and babies

A pioneering system to measure a mother's love for her baby has been devised by scientists in an attempt to identify children most at risk from developing health and behavioural problems in later life. The 10-minute psychological test is intended by researchers to help health and social workers recognise women who are struggling to bond with their offspring.

It has been developed by the family and personal relationships laboratory at Heriot-Watt University, in conjunction with the Scottish Executive's Centre for Integrated Healthcare Research, for new mothers with children under the age of six months. Evidence from a number of surveys carried out in the US and elsewhere has indicated that youngsters deprived of a loving, trusting relationship in their early years are more likely to develop antisocial behaviour as they grow up.

(Extracted from an article by Paul Kelbie, The Independent, 29.09.06)

Welsh Assembly to raise awareness of Foundation Phase

The Welsh Assembly is developing a communication strategy to raise awareness of the Foundation Phase (FP) prior to its roll-out in 2008, amid concerns that its implementation will 'flounder'.

Academics from the University of London's Institute of Education and the University of Wales Institute found, in their final evaluation of the play-based FP pilots, that stakeholders reported that they received 'no information and communication at all'. Others complained that 'too little was often provided too late' and that the channels of communication were often 'unclear and arbitrary'.

The evaluation report recommends that structural change is needed to ensure that local authority staff are better equipped to support FP settings and says that without this 'implementation will flounder'. Welsh education minister Jane Davidson told delegates at the launch of the action plan at the 'Building the Foundation Phase' conference in Cardiff on Monday that the Assembly is developing a national marketing plan to support local and national staff recruitment and retention.
programmes. She said she will also be looking at ways to explain to parents, carers, governors and the public what the FP is about and what changes it will bring.

The evaluation revealed other 'key challenges' that need to be addressed, based on the 41 schools and early years settings that took part in pilots from September 2004 to October 2006.

The final evaluation report, *Monitoring and evaluation of the effective implementation of the Foundation Project across Wales*, and the action plan can be downloaded at [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk)

*(Extracted from Nursery World, 07.12.06)*

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**National award for Plymouth project**

An innovative project aimed at re-designing the Children's Speech and Language Service to ensure efficient and clinically effective intervention and support, has won national praise. The project, which has redesigned the way the service is delivered, and also included a multi-professional preventive project, *It's good to talk with babies and children in Plymouth*, beat stiff competition to win the 'Clinical Engagement' category at the NHS Alliance Acorn Awards on 23 and 24 November.

This award followed an earlier showcase presentation of the, *It's good to talk*, project at the National Literacy Trust *Working Together to Get Talking* conference in October, where it was held up as one of the top seven examples of best practice in the UK. Dr Gaye Powell, Head of Speech & Language Services at Plymouth Teaching Primary Care Trust, explained: "The Children's Speech & Language Service has for some time struggled with high numbers of referrals each year, long waiting times, difficulty with recruiting and retaining skilled therapists. We were also aware of the high number of children (over 50%) starting school with poor communication skills across the city, which could be reduced if parents and carers adopted good patterns of early communication.

"We therefore wanted to work on prevention, as well as ensuring clinical time was being used as effectively as possible to benefit children and families. Whilst acknowledging there is still a backlog of children waiting to be seen as a result of the high demand - over 100 referrals per month, we know that more focused intervention has improved the effectiveness and will continue to do so.

"The *It's good to talk* project included speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, early years workers, Sure Start staff, health visitors, child minders, library workers, training co-ordinators, midwives, parent partnership and children's centres all working together to improve the early interaction and communication skills of parents and children aged 0-3 years across Plymouth. We identified examples of good practice that we could roll out across the city, and all agreed that face-to-face talking was the single message we should use to promote early interaction and communication. Health visitors in particular, have played a key role in delivering this message using 'Talking Tips' to support the advice they provide at all new born hearing assessments.

"We've also seen significant benefits for children, families and staff through the redesign of our service. Over 800 children and their parents have used our new style..."
service since April. We have piloted two successful twilight advice sessions for parents of children who stammer, and have had some very positive feedback from a secondary school age pilot which supports teaching assistants to give the intensive support to children who need it.

(Plymouth PCT, 28.11.06)

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**Lords debate speech therapy plans**

The importance of having speech and language professionals working in children's centres was the focus of a debate in the House of Lords last week. The Liberal Democrats' Baroness Walmsley asked schools minister Lord Adonis how many speech and language professionals were in place in children's centres and how many have advanced plans to have them.

Lord Adonis said there was 'no breakdown of the figures by location', but with plans to increase the number of children's centres to 2,500 in 2008 and to 3,500 by 2010, he said: "we would expect to see steadily more speech and language therapists employed therein." He added: "It is the responsibility of local children's trusts, which bring together the local authority, the education service and the local NHS, to plan that provision locality by locality."

But Liz Attenborough, manager of Talk To Your Baby, the National Literacy Trust's early language initiative, which is calling for greater investment in speech and language therapy services for the early years, said: "It needs more than hoping that children's centres will have the staff in place. It's an essential preventative measure. "In too many places there are long waiting lists for therapy, as health budget cuts are not in step with educational needs. This means that too many vulnerable children are not getting the help they need at the start of their educational career."

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) said that local NHS cutbacks are threatening vital speech and language therapy services. Jane Mackenzie, policy officer for England, said: "Primary care trusts and strategic health authorities are seeking short-term financial savings at the expense of delivering the service children and adults desperately need."

The RCSLT said that the Government predicts that it will be more than ten years until there are enough speech and language therapists to meet the needs of local communities. But research undertaken by the RCSLT in July found that funding cuts at local level mean that eight out of ten newly-trained therapists cannot find jobs.

(By Nicole Weinstein, Nursery World, 09.11.06)

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**Day nursery may harm under-3s, say child experts**

An eminent group of child-care experts raises serious concerns today about the long-term effects of putting very young children into inadequate day nurseries. In a letter to The Daily Telegraph, they call for an "urgent national debate" on whether children
under three should be cared for by anyone other than trusted and familiar figures in their lives.

The group, including the psychologist and author Steve Biddulph, Sir Richard Bowlby, the president of the Centre for Child Mental Health in London, and Prof Allan Schore, the renowned American child psychologist, demand clearer vision on what babies and very young children need to develop emotionally. "Consistent, continuous care by a trusted figure is the key to providing a secure and nurturing environment for very young children," the letter says.

"Research suggests that its absence can lead to behavioural difficulties." With the Government's Sure Start scheme encouraging more day-care nurseries, more parents may be placing children "in circumstances that may not be appropriate to their emotional needs". That risks "storing up behavioural difficulties in a significant proportion of the young children who spend extended periods of time" separated from their mothers and in inappropriate care. The effects would be felt for years.

This morning's letter was spawned by a 2,600-word paper written by Sir Richard, and circulated to 30 of the world's leading experts and approved by most of them. Sir Richard laid out all available evidence about the best way to care for children, particularly in the crucial period between birth and the age of 30 months. He concluded: "In a society which encourages both parents to work outside the home while their children are under three, it is 'attachment-focused' child-care arrangements that have a crucial role to play in facilitating healthy emotional development."

In an interview with The Daily Telegraph, Sir Richard said: "I am not saying that all group day-care is bad any more than I am saying that all mothers are perfect. But it is far more difficult for a day-care nursery to provide an environment in which a child will develop normal emotions than it is for a mother, or in her absence, a father, grandparent or child-minder. Rather than funding day-care nurseries through Sure Start, the Government should make it easier for parents to use their child-care allowances to pay a grandmother or other relative to look after their children, or to use it themselves as 'pay' to look after the child themselves."

(Extracted from an article by Ben Fenton, the Daily Telegraph, 21.10.06)

Believe it or not, today's busy parents see more of their children than 30 years ago

The pace of modern life means parents are busier now than they have ever been. But they are actually spending more time with their children than parents did 30 years ago, according to a report by a consumer think-tank. This new breed of 'super parents' spend an average of nearly 100 minutes a day on childcare, rising to over 200 minutes when they care for the under-threes. This far exceeds the 25 minutes a day those in the 1970s spent looking after their children.

Today's parents often juggle childcare with busy work commitments and are more likely to sacrifice spending time with their partners than their offspring. This is despite the commonly held view that modern families do not have as much time to devote to their children as in previous generations. The explanation, researchers believe, is that women in the 1970s who stayed at home were often occupied by housework
rather than quality time with their youngsters. Modern parents are also less likely to allow their children to play in the street and further afield because of safety fears, which means they give youngsters their undivided attention.

The Changing Face of Parenting report by the Future Foundation, commissioned by Calpol, was based on a survey of 795 parents and non-parents in April. It found that women still shoulder most childcare responsibilities, with the majority of time spent outside any paid employment devoted to youngsters. They also lost the most sleep. The most popular form of childcare was by the mother or father first, followed by day nurseries, childminders and grandparents. Despite increasing numbers of females in the workforce, only about a fifth of those surveyed, of both sexes, believed that the family would be happier if the woman worked.

But Hugh McKinney, of the National Family Campaign, cast doubt on the results. He said: "It's not possible or sensible to draw accurate comparisons between the 1970s and now. The rise in daytime children's television will mean for many parents that any such extra time with their youngsters is spent in front of the television, rather than interacting with them."

(Sarah Harris, Education Correspondent, Daily Mail, 04.10.06)

Frozen budgets mean speech and language therapy cuts

When eight-year-old Brandon Turvey first started at Ashmead school he could barely string a sentence together and struggled to understand basic requests from his teachers. Four years later, he feels confident about speaking in class thanks to a one-hour session each week with a speech and language therapist. Unfortunately, younger pupils at the school in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, may not get such specialist help - and nor may thousands of others across England.

Schools in several local education authorities are reporting that their local primary care trusts cannot fund more speech therapists because of cash-flow difficulties. Vale of Aylesbury primary care trust told Ashmead school last year that it could not accommodate any new referrals because of a budget freeze and lack of staff. Jane Loder, head teacher of Ashmead, said she had four pupils - including Brandon - who were entitled to speech and language therapy on account of their special needs but that it did not seem to be available to other children. She said: "We've got another 25 children in key stage 1 who have problems and we want to refer them to a specialist to see if they warrant a statement, but we can't. If children cannot communicate and express themselves orally, then they can't write or spell either. We feel we are failing our children if we cannot get them the help they need."

.Jane MacKenzie, of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, said 78% of speech and language managers had their budgets frozen or cut for this academic year. Of the 700 trainee speech and language therapists who graduated this year, only 140 have found jobs.

(Extracted from an article by Jenny Legg, TES, 20.10.06)
Under 5: Why was the National Literacy Trust set up and what is the organisation's role?
Liz Attenborough: The National Literacy Trust (NLT) was set up as an independent charity in 1993, dedicated to building a literate nation. We encompass all ages, and consider the broadest picture, acknowledging how home and social circumstances help lay the foundations for successful learning, alongside education. We provide a large support network to all aspects of literacy through our extensive website, regular conferences and email newsletters. We also put ideas into practice with practical initiatives such as Reading the Game, harnessing the power of football and footballers to encourage reading.

What work are you doing in the early years sector?
In 2003 we set up Talk To Your Baby (TTYB) as the NLT's early language campaign, really in response to concerns from head teachers about the poor communication skills of young children on entry to primary school. A survey we did in 2001 with the National Association of Head Teachers showed that 75% of heads felt skills had significantly declined in the previous five years. We don't think there is one single reason why we have these problems now, but whatever the reason for the problem it's clear that it needs tackling urgently. TTYB isn't a programme as such, but exists to support early years professionals who work with families and young children by giving them the information they need. For example, we have created downloadable 'Quick Tips' information sheets on our website - eight topics covered both in English and bilingually in nine languages - that anyone can print off and photocopy. We also reach parents and carers through advocacy work in the media, getting the topic raised and talked about on local radio, through magazines, and in newspapers. We want to change the culture so that everyone knows the importance (and the pleasure) of communicating with babies and young children.

The Talk To Your Baby campaign encourages verbal communication with pre-school children. How does verbal communication relate to developing literacy skills later on in life?
Communication skills are the foundation of all learning, but also social and emotional development too, so couldn't be more important and fundamental as a starting block. You need to know how words and sentences work before you can begin to think about reading and writing. Over time the coos, babbles and smiles of babies will move on to first words and sentences. Interaction helps this natural process along. Sharing books is an especially good way to encourage language development, from the very youngest age. Storytelling introduces structure and language patterns that help form the building blocks for reading and writing skills. Young children can understand far more than they can say, and need to learn about things such as turn-taking as the basis for conversation.

What can early years practitioners do to try to encourage families to communicate more with their children?
The best way to encourage good communication is to model it yourself, to show how important it is and how effective it can be with young children. This means, in particular, learning to listen to children, to give them the space to babble and talk back from the very youngest age, making eye contact and allowing them time to respond. It's hard not to rush young children, but it's worth taking the time to give them the time and space to develop, by playing simple games with them and singing
songs. Many parents don't realise that it is never too early to start talking and listening, as babies are born to be sociable but they need adult interaction to make that happen. Parents need to know that a language-rich home helps a child to develop in many ways. You should try not to ask too many questions. Instead, talk to them about their favourite toy and let them take the lead. Most brain development occurs from birth to age two, so babies and toddlers need stimulation as much as they need nourishing food.

What is your organisation's view on the findings of the Rose Review and use of synthetic phonics?
TTYB joined forces with other early years literacy and language organisations, such as PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership) and Bookstart, to welcome the emphasis in the Review on speaking and listening skills. We also welcomed the emphasis on the importance of the home in sowing the foundations for reading. The Review recognised that too much infighting on methods of learning to read isn't helpful, and that we need to move on to ensure that phonics can be made to be fun as part of the total reading package. It can be very off-putting for parents to hear the arguments. They just need to know that in the home their role is to share books, give time for reading, and encourage communication at all times to give their child the best basis for learning to read at school.

What are the big issues that you will be focusing on in the next year?
Early next year the NLT is launching the Family Reading Campaign, a partnership campaign working to ensure that the importance of encouraging reading in the home is integrated into the planning and activity of all the key organisations concerned with education, health and parenting. We would love to hear from Under 5 readers who have interesting stories to share about how they put family reading into action, as we want to reach everyone with good ideas that they can pick up on themselves. At TTYB we are stepping up our efforts to call for the creation and production of more affordable, sociable buggies that face the pusher, so that everyone can buy a buggy that allows them maximum talking time when pushing their baby or toddler around. It's such a waste to have young children staring into space, alone, when they could spend that time chatting to their pusher.

(Under 5, October 2006)

Breastfeeding has negligible effect on babies' IQ

It is one of the most hotly debated topics in pregnancy and early motherhood. Does breastfeeding really boost a baby's intelligence? Now the largest scientific study yet carried out has settled the issue. Breastfed babies are indeed smarter - because their mothers are. Mothers who breastfeed tend to be more intelligent, more highly educated and to provide more stimulation at home. The higher IQ of their babies is therefore mostly inherited, accounting for 75 per cent of the difference between them and bottle-fed babies, the researchers found:

The rest of the difference is down to the environment in which they are raised. Breastfed babies have mothers who are older and better educated, and live in nicer homes where they get more attention. When all these factors were taken into account, breastfeeding made less than half a point's difference in the intelligence scores - laying to rest a myth that has held sway for almost 80 years.
Geoff Der, a statistician from the Medical Research Council's social and public health sciences unit at the University of Edinburgh, said: "This question has been debated ever since a link between the two was first discovered in 1929. We found 73 articles which dealt with the link." He added: "Breastfed children do tend to score higher on intelligence tests, but they also tend to come from more advantaged backgrounds."

The study, published online by the British Medical Journal today, is based on US data on the breastfeeding history and IQs of 5,000 children and 3,000 mothers, which was not available in the UK. Mr Der concluded: "There is no reason why the same findings would not apply here."

The researchers also looked at families where one child was breastfed and the other wasn't. This confirmed the findings that breastfeeding made no difference to IQ. Mr Der said: "Intelligence is determined by factors other than breastfeeding. But breastfeeding has many benefits for both mother and child. It is definitely the smart thing to do." In England and Wales, 77 per cent of babies are breastfed but more than a third of mothers stop within the first six weeks. Nine out of 10 mothers in the professional and managerial class start breastfeeding, compared with just over six out of 10 among manual workers.

Breastfeeding boosts the baby's immune system and protects against infections, and reduces the risk of asthma and eczema in childhood. It also reduces the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity in adulthood. But Rosie Dodds, policy researcher at the National Childbirth Trust, said evidence from parts of the world where breastfeeding is more common among poorer women cast doubt on the claim that it had no link with intelligence.

In the Philippines, where bottle feeding is a sign of status preferred by working mothers, a study published in the Journal of Nutrition in 2005 found that babies who were breastfed had higher intelligence, despite their more deprived backgrounds. Ms Dodds said: "We cannot rule out an influence of breastfeeding on intelligence especially in babies born prematurely who may have missed out on what their biological growth would have been. Breastfeeding is more likely to provide the nutrients they need to grow and develop."

Another study of 14,600 babies, half of whom were breastfed, conducted by University College hospital, London, and published in the US journal Paediatrics this year, found there were more developmental delays among the children who were bottle fed.

(Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor, The Independent, 04.10.06)

Booktrust Early Years Awards 2006

The winners of the Booktrust Early Years Awards 2006 include:

Baby Book Award
How Do You Feel? by Mandy Stanley (HarperCollins Children's)

Pre-School Award
Mr Pusskins by Sam Lloyd (Orchard Books)
Modern life leads to more depression among children

Letter to the Daily Telegraph

Sir - As professionals and academics from a range of backgrounds, we are deeply concerned at the escalating incidence of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions. We believe this is largely due to a lack of understanding, on the part of both politicians and the general public, of the realities and subtleties of child development.

Since children's brains are still developing, they cannot adjust - as full-grown adults can - to the effects of ever more rapid technological and cultural change. They still need what developing human beings have always needed, including real food (as opposed to processed "junk"), real play (as opposed to sedentary, screen-based entertainment), first-hand experience of the world they live in and regular interaction with the real-life significant adults in their lives.

They also need time. In a fast-moving hyper-competitive culture, today's children are expected to cope with an ever-earlier start to formal schoolwork and an overly academic test-driven primary curriculum. They are pushed by market forces to act and dress like mini-adults and exposed via the electronic media to material which would have been considered unsuitable for children even in the very recent past.

Our society rightly takes great pains to protect children from physical harm, but seems to have lost sight of their emotional and social needs. However, it's now clear that the mental health of an unacceptable number of children is being unnecessarily compromised, and that this is almost certainly a key factor in the rise of substance abuse, violence and self-harm amongst our young people.

This is a complex socio-cultural problem to which there is no simple solution, but a sensible first step would be to encourage parents and policy-makers to start talking about ways of improving children's well-being. We therefore propose as a matter of urgency that public debate be initiated on child-rearing in the 21st century this issue should be central to public policy-making in coming decades.

(Daily Telegraph, 12.09.06)

Liz Attenborough of Talk To Your Baby was one of the signatories to this letter. It resulted in the Daily Telegraph launching the Hold on to Childhood campaign. To find out more about the campaign or to participate, visit http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?view=BLOGDETAIL&grid=P30&blog=yourview&xml=/news/2006/09/13/nchild13.xml
What worked for me

_Liz Attenborough, manager of Talk To Your Baby, the early language campaign for the National Literacy Trust, on the benefits of baby babbling._

Young children’s communication skills are a cause for concern. In a 2001 survey of nursery heads, the National Association of Head Teachers found that 75 per cent were concerned that children’s language competence at entry had dropped significantly over the previous five years.

In 2003 I was asked by the National Literacy Trust to set up a campaign to address this problem. We called it Talk To Your Baby. We view communication and language as the core of social and emotional development as well as the basis for learning. One primary teacher told me that five years ago she used to highlight the children with language problems, now she only highlights the ones without. There is no single cause, but it is true that people do not talk to their children as much as they used to. Many children watch television alone in their bedrooms, family mealtimes are in decline and family units are smaller, with fewer siblings and grannies to talk to.

None of us remembers learning to talk, we don't know how we did it, but children need to learn it - it doesn’t just happen by osmosis. Parents must allow a child to babble without a dummy in its mouth, because babbling is the early part of language. We want parents to feel that they can help their child’s language to develop, so on our website we have information sheets in nine languages. Tips include reading together - a fabulous way of increasing vocabulary - and singing, because children learn language more easily if there’s a tune attached. Every new parent in Plymouth last year got one of these sheets, and health visitors are trained to introduce it, which is great.

Because we’re only a one-and-a-half person campaign, we’re not trying to do things on the ground; we support professionals who work with families, and we try to reach parents directly through the media. We want to raise the debate. People say that they don’t see people talking to their babies in the street, so they don’t do it either because they don’t want to look stupid. Instead of old ladies tutting every time a child makes a noise, wouldn’t it be great if we had a culture that encouraged children to be seen and heard?

(The Times Public Agenda, 12.09.06)

Speech therapy quietly sidelined

Speech and language therapy services are in ‘crisis’ according to a new report revealing that the majority of services will be unable to meet future patient needs. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), which commissioned the report, says there is a ‘devastating de-prioritisation’ of speech therapy services by local primary care trusts (PCTs). It claims that 78% of speech and language therapists across the UK have had their budgets reduced or frozen in the coming year.

Jane MacKenzie, national policy officer at RCSLT, says many local speech and language therapy departments are now badly underfunded. She points to the situation in the Value of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire, where speech therapists
have been turning children away because of staff shortages. "Earlier this year, the Home Office recognised speech and language therapists as an occupational shortage," she says. "But our research shows that nearly two-thirds of managers say they are unable to take on any new therapists this year."

Worse still, she says, is that 80% of 2006 speech and language therapy graduates have been unable to find jobs. "This is madness when you consider that this year an NHS workforce review predicted that it will take 10 years until there are enough speech and language therapists to meet the needs of local communities," says MacKenzie. "The reality on the ground is that local PCT commissioners are trying to balance their books by slashing so-called 'soft' services like speech and language therapy, with no consideration of central government policy or the long-term consequences of their actions."

The college says there is more need for speech and language therapy intervention for children, thanks to better recognition of problems such as autism and learning difficulties. The rise in strokes and better cancer survival have also led to a spike in patients needing help.

*(Annie Kelly, The Guardian, 06.09.06)*

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**DVDs 'are better than books' for your baby**

DVDs are better than books for helping small babies develop vital learning skills, says a top researcher. Babies have to use their eyes and brain to track movement in images from DVDs, but static pages in a book provide no stimulation, explains Professor Annette Karmiloff-Smith, a world leading scientist specialising in baby development. The professor, who works at the Institute of Child Health (ICH) and Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, says 'emotional reactions' have held back many parents from using educational DVDs to help their children.

But scientific research shows interacting with moving images encourages them to optimise each stage of development. Normal TV viewing is too complicated, however, and causes babies to become 'mesmerised' as they struggle with too-rapid movements and poor colour differentiation. Prof. Karmiloff-Smith is the scientific advisor on Baby Bright DVDs, a range of baby development videos underpinned by her ongoing research programme designed to maximise interaction between infants and the screen.

She says that from the age of three months, infants are attracted by movement, while scientific studies show babies love looking at faces, so the DVD series has lots of close-ups. She adds: "Rather than stare passively at the centre of the screen, it is important to enable babies to track moving objects with their eyes and anticipate where objects will appear next." She says babies need to see partial images from which they can build up a whole image - just as in real life.

"But TV and some so-called baby videos are not based on the science of child development and they both have the same problem - they make the baby a passive observer," she adds. "It's a controversial idea, but good-quality DVDs are better than books between the ages of three and five months.
"Parents should not be worried about using DVDs - why do they use mobiles above the cot if it's not to stimulate the baby - but they have to be prepared to interact with them just as you would do when reading a book," she says. Prof. Karmiloff-Smith, who heads the neuro-cognitive development unit at ICH, says two-thirds of children under two years watch TV or videos most days but they should not spend more than an hour in front of the screen. "Children should never have a TV in their bedrooms at any age because they watch too much and unsuitable programmes."

(Daily Mail, 05.09.06)

Specialists say that preventing youngsters from walking increases risk of obesity and back pain

Parents are condemning their children to a lifetime of obesity and back problems by not letting them walk at a young enough age, paediatricians have warned. Rather than outgrowing their prams and pushchairs by the age of two or three, an increasing number of older children - some up to primary school age - are still being wheeled about, because their parents are too busy or too afraid to let them walk.

A child development specialist Dr Martin Ward-Platt, of the Royal Victoria Infirmary, in Newcastle, said: "It is a worrying trend. But one now takes for granted the sight of big children being pushed around in buggies, when in the past this was simply not the case. It is done for a number of reasons. There is convenience and control, as well as perceptions about safety - no running off onto busy main roads. But many children who have a bit of a whinge also can easily be silenced if stuffed into a chair."

He added: "It is not doing them any good. One has to bear in mind the pushchair is a recent invention in terms of human evolution. Once children could walk, they were expected to toddle along on their own two feet. Anything that reduces exercise in young children, broadly speaking, is not a good idea. Anything that is allowing calories to accumulate week after week means you could end up with a problem with weight. Children need to be active as early as possible."

Half of all babies start to walk by 12 months, and the remainder are toddling by 18 months. In the past, traditional, heavy prams were usually abandoned by the age of two, with reins used for safety when the child was walking. However, the advent of lightweight buggies made it an easy option for parents to keep wheeling their children about well past the toddler stage. Some even take pushchairs to the school gates to collect their five and six-year-olds.

(Beezy Marsh, Health Correspondent, The Telegraph, 27.08.06)

Hospital lighting 'could affect new babies'

The bright lights of hospitals may slow the development of premature babies and make them feel 'depressed', says new research. In much the same way that a lack of daylight can exacerbate depression among adults, known as seasonal affective disorder, babies under constant, harsh lighting may gain weight slowly and feel unhappy.
Andrew Shennan, professor of obstetrics for Tommy’s, the baby charity, said: “The link between light exposure and its effects on mood and behaviour are now quite firmly established, supported by research into conditions such as SAD. Currently, any babies who are admitted to a special care baby unit are exposed to incredibly harsh lighting.”

A study in the journal *Paediatric Research*, by Douglas McMahon, professor of biological sciences at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, found that exposing baby mice to constant light kept the biological clock in their brains from developing properly and could have a lasting effect on their behaviour.

*(Sarah Womack, Social Affairs Correspondent, The Telegraph, 21.08.06)*

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**New parent community**

Parentline, the national charity for parents, has added a new online community to its website. The new section features message boards where parents can exchange information and provide support for one another and a Q and A section where parents can ask questions on any subject from bullying to budgeting. Parentline is especially interested to hear whether black and minority ethnic parents are receiving the support and information they need and have added a new survey to the site to collect their views.

The website also features a new section on travelling with children, with hints and tips on how to plan your journey and how to survive the boredom of long car journeys. For more information or to fill in the survey, visit [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

*(My child, August/September 2006)*

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**New study on experience of childhood**

A major independent study has been launched to understand and address the issues faced by today's children and young people. The Good Childhood Inquiry, managed by The Children’s Society, aims to renew society’s understanding of childhood in the twenty-first century.

The charity said it believes too many children in the UK are experiencing poor childhoods. It launched the inquiry after research found that the wellbeing of children in the UK is among the lowest in Europe, with many, particularly refugee children, those in trouble with the law and disabled children, experiencing increased levels of mental health problems.

Lord Layard, emeritus professor of economics at the London School of Economics, will chair the independent inquiry panel.

*(Extracted from an article by Nicole Weinstein, Nursery World, 03.08.06)*

For more information visit [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/)
Early years in action on Teachers' TV

Teachers' TV is running its Learning for Fun strand every morning throughout August, from 6am to 10am, Monday to Friday. The programmes are aimed at the youngest children and are designed so that viewers enjoy playing, while receiving structured learning at the same time.

Monday 7 August is the start of Every Child Matters week. Programmes will show how children and their carers and teachers are being affected by the new government legislation.

From Monday 27 August there will be a strand of early years programmes for one hour from 12pm, 6pm and 10pm daily. They will include Early Years in Action: Listening Skills for Staff, in which a nursery emphasises the importance of listening to young children, and Early Years Workshop: Nursery 1 & 2, showing techniques for observing and assessing nursery children.

You can see Teachers' TV on Sky 880, Telewest 240, ntl 803, HomeChoice 845 and Freeview 88 (12-6am). Teachers TV programmes are available to download for free from www.teachers.tv.

(Adapted from Sure Start News, Issue 41, 03.08.06)

Reading scheme pilots are extended

Early reading pilot schemes, which involve specialist training with practitioners, will be extended to more areas from next term, with funding until September 2008. National director of the Foundation Stage Ruth Pimentel said the scheme, which started last September in 180 schools and linked early years settings in 18 areas, would be extended to 32 more local authorities.

She also confirmed that the 'early reading development pilots' had been renamed 'communication, language and literacy development'. Ms Pimentel said: "It's to broaden it out to look at building on speaking and listening and the understanding that children's language development is the building block to their reading success."

The scheme supports professional development and involves clusters of practitioners in local areas sharing knowledge. It uses materials such as Sure Start's Communicating Matters and traditional nursery rhymes and poetry cards, linking these with the outdoor area, music and movement.

(Catherine Gaunt, Nursery World, 20.07.06)
Looking back

TTYB's Liz Attenborough comments on the changing face of early years provision in Nursery Education magazine.

The fact that childcare issues are now high on the political agenda has been a huge change. Nobody would think of putting out a party manifesto today without including childcare issues. Schools and early years settings are making an effort to involve parents, but we are still a long way from parents feeling empowered. If you talk about synthetic phonics, it scares parents off. You need to say to them: "You have a role to play. This is what you can do." If you get parents on board, you will have much better results, so it is absolutely worth the investment.

Liz Attenborough, Manager of Talk To Your Baby, National Literacy Trust

(Nursery Education, August 2006)

Early years on Teachers' TV

As part of its early years focus, Teachers’ TV is running a range of programmes for early years workers and pupils. From 24 July it is running a Learning For Fun strand for two weeks, with early years programmes from 6am to 9am each day. Teachers’ TV is available on Sky 880, Telewest 240, ntl 803, KIT 70, HomeChoice 845 and Freeview 88 (12-6am). Programmes can also be downloaded for free from www.teachers.tv, where there is a full schedule listing.

The Great Parenting Experiment

ITV is to broadcast a new series from 17 July, which will show families using the Triple P Parenting programme to manage their children's behaviour. They are inviting parents of three to nine-year-olds to work alongside the series, which is called 'Driving Mum and Dad Mad' by trying out the positive parenting advice for themselves, as part of a national research project. Parents interested in taking part in the project should visit www.greatparentingexperiment.net.

New stakeholder group to champion early years and childcare sector

A new stakeholder group that will advise Ministers on the implementation of the Government's 10-Year Childcare Strategy and wider early years and childcare policy meets for the first time today.

The new Sure Start, Extended Schools and Child Care Stakeholder Group is chaired by Dame Julie Mellor and consists of members from local authorities, health, the private and voluntary sector and frontline staff. Its role will be to:

- Act as a forum for discussion of the implementation issues arising from the 10 Year Strategy, and the impact on various partners.
- Act as a sounding board for emerging plans, guidance and regulations.
• Feed back to Ministers and policy makers on the impact of the Strategy, focussing on the effect on front line practice and child outcomes.
• Advise on the best way that the Department and others can support delivery.

Children and Families Minster Beverley Hughes said: "Our 10-Year Childcare Strategy made clear the Government's commitment to give any child the benefits of extended activities at school and give every parent the choice and flexibility in balancing home and work life. The action plan that we published in April set the agenda for implementing it but the Government will not be able to achieve this alone. The Sure Start, Extended Schools and Childcare Stakeholder group will provide an essential forum for us to engage with our partners, to learn from best practice and work together to overcome the challenges ahead. I very much look forward to working with Dame Julie and the other members."

Dame Julie Mellor said: "The investment that we have seen in early years and childcare in recent years is something that we should all value and be proud of. However, we must make sure that the time, effort and money being put in is making the biggest possible difference to the lives of children and families. The experience of practitioners and front line managers will be vital in ensuring that this happens and I am delighted to be chairing a group of such experienced and dedicated people. Together I am sure that we can make a valuable contribution as the Government implements its 10-Year Childcare Strategy."

(\textit{Department for Education and Skills, 22.06.06})

The secret of a happy baby: Lots of cuddles

It is the dilemma that all new parents face. Should a baby be instantly comforted when upset - or left to cry for a few minutes? Scientists claim to have solved the problem after a study found that babies who are ignored just cry more. And this behaviour carries on for at least the first three months of their lives, the experts say.

Parents who adopt a 'hands off' approach to childcare have babies who cry 50 per cent more than infants who are picked up and comforted straight away, say researchers. It suggests that holding babies for around ten hours a day produces infants that fuss the least. The findings will reignite debate about whether or not parents should leave babies to cry.

Some experts, such as Gina Ford, believe in set sleeping and feeding routines. They say that if babies wake up and cry during designated sleeping hours, they should not be picked up. But child development expert Professor Margot Sunderland claims that leaving children to cry could make them more susceptible to depression.

Now Professor Ian St James Roberts, from the University of London's Institute of Education, has looked at whether babies' crying relates to how often they are held. The study reported today in New Scientist magazine, involved three groups of new parents. The first set came from London, the second from Copenhagen and a third was a mixed group of parents from Denmark, the US and the UK. The mixed group had declared they planned to practise 'proximal care', which involves picking up and holding children for much of the time they are awake and responding rapidly if they cry.
It is based on the theory that babies need constant physical contact with another human from birth. They sleep in their parents' bed and are fed on demand. Parents in the study were asked to complete a diary of their infant's crying, and this was backed up by audio recordings and questionnaires on feeding and sleeping habits. When the babies were ten days old, the proximal group were typically holding their children for around 16 hours a day. The Copenhagen parents held their infants for just under ten hours and the London group for eight and a half hours.

The researchers found that at two and five weeks of age, the babies who were held for just eight and a half hours a day were crying and fussing 50 per cent more than the others. Even at 12 weeks of age they were still crying more, according to the study, which will be published in the June edition of the Journal Pediatrics. Professor St James Roberts concluded that comforting your baby on demand could reduce fussing and crying for the early weeks of life.

(By Julie Wheldon, Daily Mail, 01.06.06)

Infants are brighter sparks

Babies aged four months are able to organise visual information in three different ways - by brightness, shape and proximity - new research shows. A study by psychologists at Reading and London South Bank Universities, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, found that infants are more capable of categorising things they see around them than previously believed.

As well as progressing to object recognition, an infant's visual attention has implications for memory, motor skills and other development. Dr Emily Farran from Reading University said: "Our findings show that infants start to organise their visual world from a very early age."

Sixty-three infants were tested at two, four, six and eight months by being placed in front of a screen and presented with an array of circles in horizontal lines, some of which were light and some dark. When the babies stopped looking they were said to be habituated.

Dr Farran said: "Then, instead of showing them one image we showed them two, one depicting horizontal stripes and the other vertical stripes . What we were looking for was a preference. This shows that they recognised that the original image was organised into rows [of different brightness]."

Differentiating brightness was observed at just two months, which supports the belief that this visual awareness is present in newborns. Proximity grouping, measuring how close visual objects are to each other, and shape grouping, both occurred at four months.

See www.esrcsocietytoday.co.uk for details of the study.

(Laura Marcus, Nursery World, 11.05.06)
Time at nursery cuts teenage pregnancies

A project that places 14 to 16-year-olds as mentors in day nurseries to discourage them from getting pregnant is expanding rapidly and may go nationwide.

Teens and Toddlers pairs teenagers from local schools in areas with high teen pregnancy rates with nursery children for two hours a week for 20 weeks. It began in Greenwich, London, in 2001 and is run by the non-profit foundation, Children: Our Ultimate Investment. (COUI).

Director Diana Whitmore said: "If you give teens a live, hands-on experience of the responsibility, work and privilege it is to have a child, they are more inclined to wait before having children. We've delivered in six boroughs and these local authorities want to mainstream the programme."

Ms Whitmore said: "We ask the nurseries to assign each teen a child who's perhaps shy or who hasn't got English as their first language. Social skills and communication is where there is the biggest impact. The nursery staff are keen to embrace and accept the young people and the young people get a sense of achievement."

(By Laura Marcus, Nursery World, 25.05.06)

Baby talk is under scrutiny

Baby talk is under scrutiny with a project to film a toddler for 14 hours a day until he reaches his third birthday. It's an attempt by Professor Deb Roy, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to understand how babies learn language. He has volunteered his own son for this baby Truman Show. Ethical? "He might be the first person to have a memory that goes back to birth," says Professor Roy gamely.

(The Times, 22.05.06)

The news for multimedia babies is good, and bad

They're bombarded with electronics starting in infancy, from the new Sesame Street for six-month-olds to game-playing laptops for toddlers. But when does being a multimedia youngster help - and when does it hurt - children's malleable brains?

The claims vary widely, from proponents who say TV and baby software can help kids learn to criticisms that it steals crucial time once spent playing and reading, or even causes attention disorders. The reality: There is little clear data on how TV affects child development at any age, much less before age two - and even less research on computers for tots, video games, and other now-pervasive electronic media. So lament child experts called together by the National Institutes of Health on Monday to debate what research is most needed, and what to tell parents in the meantime.
“Content does matter. Television designed to enhance cognitive development does so,” said University of Massachusetts psychologist Daniel Anderson, referring to the well-studied preschool shows Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues. But, “other kinds of TV or too much TV may interfere with cognitive development,” he warned. “Most immediately, we need to know the effects of very early media exposure.”

The American Academy of Paediatrics says children under two shouldn’t watch TV at all, and that older kids should watch no more than two hours a day. Yet the Kaiser Family Foundation found in 2003 that two-thirds of children under two were watching TV an hour a day plus almost another hour of computer or video-like games. Almost half of four- to six-year-olds had TVs in their bedrooms. And after age eight, ‘screen time’ - TV plus computers and other electronic media - soared to 6.5 hours a day, on average.

For babies in particular, there’s a skyrocketing market: The Baby Einstein video craze aside, there’s a new satellite TV channel just for babies, a computer game that requires infants to bang the keyboard to change the screen, and a multitude of talking books and DVD-based ‘learning systems’. Why? Parents in general don't view electronic media as bad. In fact, they often ask if their babies will miss out if they don't sit them in front of the computer early, noted David Bickham of the Children's Hospital of Boston media and child health centre.

“There's a reason why parents put the two-year-old in front of the television,” agreed Amy Jordan of the University of Pennsylvania. Maybe they live in a neighbourhood where it's not safe to play outside, or they just need time to cook or take a shower. When it comes to older kids, many parents consider watching American Idol with their preteen quality family time - and few parents even know how to use those TV ratings mandated to help determine age-appropriate content, Jordan says. When 'Y7 FV' flashed in the corner of the screen, for instance, many parents told her they thought it meant ‘family values’ - when it really means not for under age seven, contains fantasy violence.

What does the existing research say? There's little disagreement that violent programs are bad for kids, leading to fear and aggressive behaviour, and that TV in a kid's bedroom leads to sleep disorders. Other issues are confusing. A few studies suggest that baby or preschool TV might lead to attention disorders, because the rapid pace of programming alters brain development - while other studies directly contradict that.

When it comes to learning, the child's age and the program's content seem key. Take babies. They are watching the new Sesame Beginnings videos for infants. The videos were an outgrowth of The Sesame Workshop after it learned that viewing of its classic Sesame Street now peaks at age two - far earlier than the three- to five-year-olds it targets to teach reading and math concepts. “What a one-year-old is getting from Sesame Street content leaves us baffled,” said workshop vice president Rosemarie Truglio. She describes the new baby videos as showing parents different ways to interact with their infants rather than aiming to ‘teach’ the tiniest viewer. "Frankly I think the don't-watch-TV-under-age-two paediatrics recommendation, in this day and age, is not helpful," said Ellen Wartella of the University of California, Riverside, who instead wants more constructive advice for parents.
Among the suggestions offered on Monday:

- No adult TV when youngsters are in the room. Rachel Barr of Georgetown University says parents think babies aren't paying attention, but research showed when Jeopardy was on in the background, tots' play was distracted.
- If you need to pop in a video for the under-two set while you cook dinner, talk them through it. "Look, that's a ball, just like your ball." "Oh, see the kitty - what does a kitty say?" It helps their comprehension, Barr's research shows.

(By Lauran Neergaard, The Associated Press, www.usatoday.com, 15.05.06)

Watching Brief

One of the hottest topics for debate over recent months has been the impact of television on tots. On one side there are those who believe Teletubbies are the saviour of every stressed out family and on the other, those who view the box as nothing less than a window to hell. Even 'expert' research has thrown up conflicting views so where does this leave parents who are nervously hovering over the on/off switch?

In the much publicised book 'Remotely Controlled', author Aric Sigman recommends that under-threes shouldn't watch TV at all and beyond that age, children should watch a maximum of one hour a day, tops. The theory is that TV with its fast-paced, Technicolor imagery hard-wires expectations in children's brains who then find it difficult to establish concentration on more gentle things, including reading and language development. "TV," claims Sigman, "is so hugely powerful because, compared to the pace with which real life unfolds and is experienced by young children, it portrays life with the fast-forward button fully pressed. Rapidly changing images, scenery and events, and high-fidelity sounds are overly stimulating and, of course, extremely interesting.

"Once you are used to food with monosodium glutamate flavour enhancer, real food doesn't taste as interesting. Television is the flavour enhancer of the audiovisual world, providing unnatural levels of sensory stimulation. Nothing in real life is comparable to this. Television overpays the child to pay attention to it, and in so doing it seems to physically spoil and damage his attention circuits."

Here in the UK, the National Literacy Trust has been so concerned about such claims that they commissioned their own research on the impact of television on language learning and held a conference to discuss the findings with academics, speech and language therapists and programme makers. And the good news for parents is that there does seem to be some middle ground.

Liz Attenborough, manager of NLT's Talk To Your baby campaign says: "We wanted to know if television really is to blame for the difficulties in communication that many young children seem to have when they arrive in school. What we found is that there are many social and cultural factors that have an impact, but that in the right circumstances television may be useful for young children's language development. TV has been part of our popular culture for over 50 years and continues to be so," says Liz. "By itself, it's neither the cause nor the answer to language issues. What's important is that parents and carers are aware of the pros and cons of TV watching and maximise the opportunities whilst diminishing potential risks."
It's important to remember that a lot of the headline grabbing research as to how children are affected by TV comes from America and as such is slightly misleading. British children's programming is quite different from US TV, where many of the studies have been based on audience samples exposed to unsupervised and unsuitable viewing, relative to age. In the UK, the BBC is quite unique in that it still holds dear the value of 'public service' and isn't a slave to rampant commercialism. The CBeebies channel is aimed specifically at pre-schoolers and focuses on education and entertainment designed to encourage learning through play. Some of the most popular programmes to be seen on the channel include Tweenies, Balamory, Bedtime Hour, Charlie & Lola, Boogie Beebies and Big Cook Little Cook.

Since its inception in February 2002, one million pre-school children enjoy the channel each week and CBeebies is now the number one children's pre-school channel offering a broad range of UK-produced programming available on all major digital platforms to UK audiences. Clare Elstow, who heads the BBC's pre-school unit, is staunch in her defence of the quality and charm of CBeebies programming: "This highly experienced group of people make great TV for toddlers by spending their working lives trying to see through their eyes.

"We're not governed by ratings or advertiser requirements," says Clare. "Programme commissioners rely on a network of nurseries, pre-schools and carers around the country to research their ideas. They have loads of advisers, literacy guidelines and early learning standards to call on and the bottom line is this highly experienced group of people make great TV for toddlers by spending their working lives trying to see through their eyes."

That might explain why a blue cow, drawn in crayon, can transfix a raucous three year old while mere adults remain baffled by the banality of it all. But it doesn't give parents an excuse to opt out and just plonk their tiny treasure in front of the box while they get on with something more interesting. To make the most of TV viewing, and ensure it's a positive experience for little ones, the NLT has the following advice:

- Although watching the same video over and over may eventually impinge on a parent's sanity, the repetition and familiarity of words and phrases makes it easier for children to learn from them.
- For a child to learn from a TV programme or video they need the opportunity to talk about what they have watched with an adult - this is easier to do when an adult and child watch together.
- It is especially important that younger children watch programming designed for their age group. This is difficult when watching with an older brother or sister who may dominate the remote control. Set aside TV time for all siblings.
- When the programme or video has finished, turn it off. There is no substitute for talking with children.

With over 95% of UK households containing at least one TV set, there's no getting away from the issues but, at the end of the day, it seems that television will not necessarily turn our children into illiterate, anti-social monsters. The key lies in proper supervision and guidance, both over the quantity and quality of viewing - and when it comes down to that, no researcher, programmer or author can do it better than mum and dad.

(Sprouts, May - June 2006)
Educating baby by DVD 'is a waste of time and money'

Educational baby videos and DVDs that claim to enhance cognitive development may be a waste of time and money, psychologists said yesterday.

One DVD by the Baby Einstein brand, which is available online, claims to “foster the development of your toddler’s speech and language skills” in babies over one year old. Another, by the company Brainy Baby, which uses the slogan "a little genius in the making", says it will “inspire logical thinking” in babies over six months old. But experts say parental interaction and the use of simple toys such as empty cotton reels and building blocks are far more effective.

Charles Ward, the general secretary of the Association of Educational Psychologists, said: "Leaving an infant in front of the television is not going to help their development at all."

Brainy Baby said it would produce evidence to show that its products were useful and did not advocate leaving babies alone in front of the television. Sarah Tremeer, the British distributor, said: "Psychologists who have not watched our products should not make claims about them. All of our award-winning DVDs are backed up by books, games and puzzles and we are keen to encourage parent and child interaction."

A complaint against the US marketing claims of Baby Einstein, part of the Disney empire, and Brainy Baby has been lodged with the US Federal Trade Commission. A group led by Dr Alvin Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, claimed that the advertisements were misleading because there was no evidence that they helped babies to learn. They have generated sales of $1 billion (£540 million) in the US since their launch in the mid-1990s.

The British promotional literature, which is not the subject of an official complaint, makes more modest claims in some cases. The Baby Einstein videos and DVDs claim through their Mothercare outlet to create a “multi-sensory learning resource”. Brainy Baby’s British website states that the Peek-A-Boo video and DVD is “brain-stimulating” and will help "nurture such important skills as language development". Baby Einstein declined to comment on the claims but said its products were designed as interactive tools for parents to use with their children.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health does not make a recommendation about how much television babies and toddlers can safely watch. However, the National Literacy Trust says viewing should be limited to 30 minutes a day with a parent. Some experts suggest infants and toddlers could be 'spoiled' for book learning by DVDs. Others argue that such products will not do any harm and can help parents understand how children play.

(Amy Iggulden, Telegraph, 11.05.06)
Baby-learning videos lack educational value, say American psychologists

The phenomenally successful market in 'baby genius' videos is under attack from American child psychologists, and the US government is considering forcing the companies who make them to withdraw claims that they help develop young children's intelligence.

The videos and DVDs, with names such as Baby Einstein, Brainy Baby and Baby Genius, have generated $1bn (£540 million) in sales in the US since their launch in the mid-90s. They are increasingly popular in the UK, where the market leader, Baby Einstein, part of the Disney empire, distributes its products through Mothercare.

A campaign group led by the Harvard psychologist Susan Linn has filed a complaint with the federal trade commission, arguing that advertisements for the videos in the US are false and deceptive because there is no evidence that watching them helps babies learn.

"The bind is that parents in this country are under terrible stress, so the idea that these videos might be educational is helpful for them, because it makes it OK to put babies in front of screens," said Ms Linn, co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. "These companies have been doing a really good job of convincing parents that these videos are education - but there's no evidence that television is beneficial, and some evidence that it may be harmful."

The Baby Einstein range, targeted at under-2s, name-drops great figures from science and the arts; titles include Baby Bach, Baby Newton and Baby Mozart Music Festival. Baby Wordsworth 'will foster the development of your toddler's speech and language skills', the company claims on its US website, though its British promotional literature is more modest. Rival firm Brainy Baby claims its Peek-a-Boo video is 'brain stimulating', and will help 'nurture such important skills as...cause and effect [and] language development'.

Many Baby Einstein videos consist largely of footage of other commercially available toys, thus serving essentially as advertising, according to campaigners. The company, which did not return calls seeking comment, does not manufacture the toys but benefits financially from 'a licensing deal like any other licensing deal', Ms Linn said.

The backlash against the videos was fuelled by a study published in December by the Kaiser Family Foundation, which found no evidence that the products helped babies learn - but discovered that 49% of American parents believed they were important in their children's education. The American Academy of Paediatrics recommends that children under two should watch no television at all.

"Nowhere does it say, 'If you buy this video it's guaranteed that your child will become a rocket scientist'," Dennis Fedoruk, founder of Brainy Baby, told the Guardian. He said his products should not be used as babysitters, and he had decided to change the firm's slogan from A Little Genius in the Making, to Learning for a Lifetime, after Kaiser expressed concern.

"That tagline is in extremely small type on the back cover beneath our logo, and I don't know of a single consumer confused by this tagline, but if it makes them happy, OK, no problem."
Views sought on skills EYPs need

The core skills, knowledge and competences needed to gain Early Years Professional (EYP) status are the subject of a draft set of standards put out for consultation by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). It is hoped the profession will attract graduates from a wide range of backgrounds, including teachers, social workers and community nurses, as well as those with early years, childhood and play qualifications.

CWDC chief executive Jane Haywood told Nursery World: "We think there are very few people in the workforce at present who have the full certified package. If you're a qualified teacher, you probably haven't done enough on child development and the nought to threes. If you've got your early years foundation degree you're at a level 5 and you'll need to do a top-up, and if you're an early childhood studies graduate, academically you've got it but you probably haven't got the practice experience."

Candidates who do not hold a degree or relevant qualification also have the chance to become an EYP if they 'demonstrate that, by other means, they have the knowledge, skills and understanding equivalent to such a qualification'. They will also need a minimum of 'two years relevant experience covering birth to the end of the Foundation Stage'.

CWDC national development manager for early years Pauline Jones said: "We don't want to close the door on any group. The pathway will vary depending on people's backgrounds. Also, we will be working with very experienced training providers who will be able to make these decisions."

CWDC is looking for ten organisations across England to deliver the EYP training. Pilot training and assessment programmes will be introduced this September, and the first EYPs will be in place by 2007. Ms Haywood said: "This is not about shipping in a set of professionals to tell everyone else how to do it; it's about upskilling the whole workforce. It's important we get the work-based routes in place."

However, early years consultants have expressed concerns that teachers could be displaced by EYPs and a two-tier system could be created, with those teaching the under-fives viewed as inferior to those teaching beyond the Foundation Stage. Ms Haywood acknowledged that the relationship between Qualified Teachers status and EYP status was one of the 'big issues'.

Currently children's centres are required to have access to an early years teacher on a half-time basis, but it is yet to be decided if the EYP will replace this. The Government wants an EYP in every children's centre by 2010, and in every full daycare setting by 2015. The CWDC believes that over time the Early Years Foundation Stage should be delivered only by people with EYP status.

The consultation ends on 19 May, and a final version of the standards will be published in July. The consultation is at www.cwdcouncil.org.uk.

(Nicole Weinstein, Nursery World, 13.04.06)
'Curriculum for babies' fears arise

Early years experts are seriously concerned that the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) will have a 'top-down' effect on the youngest children in daycare and that it is effectively a 'curriculum' for babies, Nursery World has learned.

The revelations come in the same week that education minister Ruth Kelly launched an action plan on the ten-year childcare strategy, which included more details of the EYFS, the new framework for children from birth to five, in advance of a formal consultation next month.

When children's minister Beverley Hughes first announced the new title for the birth-to-five framework late last year, it was widely understood by the early years sector that the intention was to combine the existing key frameworks Birth to Three Matters and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage.

However, Nursery World has spoken to early years experts who have attended consultation events on the new framework in the past two weeks and they have voiced grave concerns about the suitability of the EYFS for babies and toddlers. In its current form, practitioners have told Nursery World, the EYFS is too formal an approach for children from birth to three. They also fear that the guidance and support available to early years practitioners and childminders through Birth to Three Matters will be lost.

While the Birth to Three Matters framework focused on four 'aspects' of development, the EYFS clearly refers to 'six areas of learning and development' from birth to five - the same areas of learning currently used in the Foundation Stage. One early years practitioner, who has seen drafts of four of the six areas of learning, said: "We laughed at the newspapers saying it's a national curriculum for babies, but now we find it is a national curriculum for babies. Birth to Three Matters has basically been abolished." The practitioner said that the six areas of learning had been 'pushed down' to the nought-to-threes. "As soon as you break it up into the six areas of learning, it becomes a curriculum."

The action plan on the ten-year strategy states that the EYFS 'will set out requirements to promote the well-being of every child and provide high quality experiences covering six areas of learning and development'. Although the EYFS does not become statutory until September 2008, the literacy and mathematics elements will be available for nurseries and childminders by September this year. However, drafts of these were apparently not shown to early years experts who attended the recent consultation events.

The early years expert added that the influence of the Rose Review, for teaching of formal synthetic phonics to five-year-olds, would lead to pressure on literacy and numeracy in reception classes and that the Foundation Stage would be driven down to the youngest children.

Early years specialist Jennie Lindon, who has also seen a draft of the EYFS, said: "There are positive elements within the draft materials, but it is not possible to judge the final balance of the document at this stage. However my most serious concern is that, as exemplified by the recommendations in the Rose Review, there will be
immense pressure to have a top-down approach and developmentally inappropriate methods will spread beyond literacy."

(Catherine Gaunt, Nursery World, 13.04.06)

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**Play England launched with £15m grant**

Play England, a five-year project to support children’s play in England, was launched on Tuesday 28 March with a £15m grant from the Big Lottery Fund. Play England will set up a national and regional support infrastructure to advise local authorities in developing play strategies and bidding for money from the Big Lottery Fund's £124m Children's Play Programme. The project is based at the Children’s Play Council, part of NCB.

A new website (www.playengland.org.uk) has been developed to provide resources and information for planners, details of workshops and networking opportunities and advocacy and campaigning support. In addition, a good practice guide, Planning for Play, will be sent to local authorities in England. The guide, published by the Big Lottery Fund, looks at the production and implementation of play strategies, covering everything from the principles of good play provision to involving the community and linking with local plans such as housing and open space. It is also available to download from the website.

"Play England aims to cement the future of children's play by giving local agencies the necessary backing and expertise," explained Adrian Voce, director of the Children's Play Council. "Hopefully this will ensure best use of the money available to improve play opportunities and make a lasting difference for children and young people. Every child should have access to play provision that is free, local and inclusive."

*Local authorities and their partners who want advice on any aspect of producing a local play strategy can call the Play England advice line on 020 7843 6300.*

(29.03.06 - 04.04.06, Children Now)

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**Elite early years cadre will drive improvement**

Ministers are to spend £250 million over two years creating a cadre of highly trained graduate-level 'early years professionals', to boost learning for young children. Private and voluntary nurseries which agree to cap fees to parents at £175 a week will be able to apply for up to £16,000 to attract graduates and train staff.

The government wants an early years professional in every children's centre by 2010, and every full daycare centre by 2015. The requirements for early years professional status will be published in June. Existing teachers will be eligible to apply. The cash will also be used to develop training routes, cover the costs of fees and supply cover for those training, enabling more early years workers to be trained.
to level 3 (the equivalent of A-level). Some staff will be trained to work with children who are disabled or have special needs.

Steve Alexander, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said: "I am pleased that the fund will not simply be used to attract graduates as new entrants, but to support existing practitioners. It is crucial that, in the quest to raise qualification levels, we do not create a two-tier workforce where new entrants are seen as superior to existing practitioners, many of whom do not have the time or financial support to access training."

The Children's Workforce Development Council, which represents employers, has been told to look at how pay and conditions - including flexible working and holiday entitlement - affect staff turnover in all children's services by September 2006.

Former education secretary Estelle Morris, who is the council's chair, hailed the creation of a professional cadre in early years. She said: "This strategy is a crucial step in creating a world-class workforce with the skills to improve the lives of our children, young people and families."

The early years professional will be one of a number of new qualifications in the children's workforce.

(Helen Ward, TES, 24.02.06)

Parents urged to talk more to their children

Forward-facing pushchairs, dinner in front of the television and even central heating are conversation killers which are bringing out tantrums in the best-behaved children. The Basic Skills Agency (BSA) - the body charged with improving literacy and numeracy - today released a booklet as part of its Talk To Me! project, urging parents to converse with their children to improve their behaviour before starting school.

"Children who can't tune in to what the teacher is saying or express their own feelings and needs adequately are at a greater risk of misunderstandings which may often lead to disruptive behaviour," the booklet says. "Once they find themselves in trouble in school, it's all too easy for them to spiral down into behaviour problems with a knock-on effect on learning."

The booklet's author, Sue Palmer, warns: "In 10 years as a travelling literacy specialist, I've talked to tens of thousands of primary teachers around the UK - and all over the country they've told me the same thing: children's speaking and listening skills seem to be deteriorating year on year. Infant teachers are especially alarmed at the levels of language of each new intake and at the difficulties children have in settling down in class to listen. This anecdotal evidence was firmly endorsed in 2003 in a survey of UK head teachers by the National Literacy Trust, which found 74% concerned at deteriorations in children's language and listening skills, and again in 2005 when the charity I CAN found 89% of nursery workers similarly concerned."

Forward-facing buggies - where parents don't talk to their children - the demise of the family meal, all-day television and the changes in parents' working habits have 'alarming implications' for pupil behaviour in the first few years of primary school,
says the BSA. Recent figures from the National Literacy Trust revealed that at least 40% of children under age four have a television in their bedroom.

Ms Palmer said: "It seems that over the last 50 years - but increasingly over the last couple of decades - unexpected side effects of social change and technological advances have conspired to reduce the amount of conversation between parents and children. As the developmental psychologist Margaret Donaldson recently said to me: 'It could be that parents are talking less to their children than at any time in human history'."

The BSA says one of the major problems is the 'patchy' communication between families and teachers, while the increased security in primary schools also means they are no longer as welcoming as they once were. Parents and teachers need clear information about the sorts of speaking and listening that underpin children's potential for learning and literacy, the BSA says, because many parents do not see the significance of talking and want their children to instead concentrate on reading and writing. Ms Palmer said: "We need a cultural revolution in schools. it is up to management (at school or LA level) to provide that impetus."

The launch of the Talk To Me! project comes as it emerged that the descriptions of what pupils must achieve in 'functional' literacy and numeracy papers at GCSE level are almost exactly the same as standards expected of primary school children in national tests. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has just published the descriptions, which focus on simple demands such as the use of capitals and full stops in English and working out fractions. Such material should be taught to children during their six years of primary school.

(Guardian Unlimited, 03.04.06)

Should we adjust our views on young children and the set?

Pre-schoolers who watch TV fare slightly better at school, an American report claims, although other experts, both in the US and UK, still advocate a prudent approach. Anjana Ahuja reports.

Don't know whether to let your young children watch TV? The academics don't know either. Scan news releases issued by the National Literacy Trust, whose Talk To Your Baby campaign urges parents to think carefully about their children's relationship with the box - (from May 2004): TV can help language development; (July 2004): Is television destroying children's minds?; (July 2005): Television-watching during childhood linked to poor educational achievement.

As well as stunting communication skills, TV has been blamed for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bullying, obesity and a lack of reading. Only this week Harvard University reported that among 500 children aged 11 and 12, viewing led to the consumption of 167 extra calories, mostly from junk food. Now a study by the University of Chicago suggests that pre-schoolers who watch TV fare marginally better at school than those who do not. Professor Matthew Gentzkow and Dr Jesse Shapiro began with the premise that current comparisons between those who watch and those who don't may be flawed.
Being economists, they noted that children who watch less tend to come from richer families, and so may enjoy advantages (better schooling, say) that also affect their educational achievement. To try to straighten out this skewing factor, the researchers travelled back in time to see if the arrival of TV in America in the late 1940s was followed by a nationwide drop in educational attainment. The box became immediately popular across all kinds of households.

Shortly after its introduction, American pre-schoolers watched an average of three to four hours a day. The economists studied the scores of more than 300,000 students who sat tests in 1965. The students were aged 11, 14 or 17, and were born during the period of TV's introduction (1948 to 1954). So, within each age group, some had spent their pre-school years watching TV and some hadn't. The surprising conclusion? That test scores were unaffected.

"We find strong evidence against the prevailing wisdom that childhood television viewing causes harm to cognitive or educational development," say Gentzkow and Shapiro. In fact, pre-schoolers who watched TV performed marginally better at school, particularly in reading and general knowledge. This finding persisted even when researchers corrected for other factors that influence test scores: school quality, income and urban deprivation. The young watchers who gained most were: non-whites; those in households where English was not the first language; and those with poorly educated mothers.

The study has yet to be peer-reviewed; it is a working paper released by the National Bureau of Economic Review, and has been submitted to the American Economic Review. Its take-home message is that rather than TV-watching being intrinsically good or bad, its impact depends on what other activities are crowded out. The researchers studied this point in more detail by seeing whether children were read to by their parents; those who were never read to benefited most from TV. Pre-schoolers whose parents read regularly performed slightly worse, though the drop in test score was not statistically significant.

The 'crowding out' hypothesis of TV's effects finds support in a study by the University of Texas at Austin, Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Pre-schoolers. Dr Elizabeth Vandewater and Dr Ellen Wartella found a link (not a good one) between TV and reading. In 'heavy TV' households (where the box is switched on most of the time), 24 per cent of children aged two and over could read; in other homes the figure was 36 per cent. Shockingly, the survey found that a quarter of American children under two have a TV in their bedroom.

That TV can be a force for good is being recognised, though advice differs according to the age of the children and programme content (Gentzkow's study did not look at content). There is little research on how under-twos interact with TV, partly because it is hard to assess how children without language make sense of what they see. For this reason the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) recommends that under-twos should not watch any TV, and that interaction with adults and other children should be the main stimulus for infants. The National Literacy Trust (NLT), which conducted a thoughtful review of the literature on TV's effect on language development, sees this stance as 'prudent'.

Liz Attenborough, of NLT's Talk To Your Baby campaign, says: "Unmediated television for very young children is not a great thing," especially for under-threes who watch more than half an hour a day. "Children don't learn to speak by osmosis. They can't learn from passive noise. They need eye contact and a chance to babble
She adds that having the telly on distracts parents, who then fail to engage fully with their child, and that parents “should be bolder about saying no to TVs in children’s bedrooms.”

The AAP’s strict position was based, in part, on the research of Dr Dimitri Christakis at the Children’s Health Institute at the University of Washington. His 2004 study of some 1,300 children showed that, between the ages of one and three, every extra hour of TV raised the risk of that child developing attention problems by 10 percent (those who watched for three hours a day had a 30 per cent risk at age seven). His team, which published the results in *Paediatrics*, concluded: “There’s no safe level [of television-watching] as there’s a small but increased risk with each hour.” Christakis suggested that pre-schoolers attuned to ‘un-naturally stimulating’ programmes found it hard to cope with the slower pace of school and home life later on.

But last month’s issue of *Paediatrics* has research refuting the presumption that TV-viewing causes ADHD. Academics from Texas Tech University studied the viewing habits of 5,000 American pre-schoolers and measured how many had ADHD diagnosed in the first year of school. The researchers found not connection; they posit that inattentive children are more likely to watch TV in the first place, perhaps because their parents are more exhausted and so more inclined to resort to the box as an electronic babysitter. So a high diet of TV may be a consequence of the ADHD, not the other way around.

The AAP’s opinion is that over-twos can benefit from TV. Its website states: “High quality, non-violent children's shows can have a positive effect on learning. Studies show that preschool children who watch educational TV programmes do better on reading and math tests than children who do not.” Christakis’s team suggested that over-twos should watch for no more than two hours a day. The NLT agrees that, for children aged between two and five, “there is evidence that attention and comprehension, receptive vocabulary, some expressive language, letter-sound knowledge, and knowledge of narrative and story-telling all benefit from high quality and age-appropriate educational programming.”

*(Times2, 11.04.06)*

**Friends preferred over professionals**

Parents prefer support from family or friends rather than professionals, according to a survey published this week. The survey found that while three quarters of parents would seek support from family, friends or neighbours, fewer than half of the 582 parents questioned would consult childminders, health visitors or TV programmes.

Volunteering charity Timebank commissioned the research to launch its Real Parents campaign and help Home-Start recruit more volunteers to support struggling parents. A spokesperson for Timebank said parents would not view the volunteers as professionals because they were ‘real people’. She added that the main qualification for volunteers was that they had to be parents themselves and many of the volunteers had had their own parenting troubles.

*(Children Now, 22-28/03/06)*
Number of new fathers changing work hours soars

The number of new fathers shifting their working hours to spend time with their babies has tripled since 2002, according to government research which reveals dads are making more career sacrifices for their families than was previously thought.

Fathers are making more changes to their working lives to fit around their home lives, according to the survey, an update on research from 2002 which has been carried out periodically since 1979. Some 71% had made changes at work, including 18% who cut their hours, 37% who shifted their working day back or forth, and 22% who changed jobs altogether. The proportion of fathers working flexible hours to fit around childcare arrangements rose from 11% to 31%. The number working from home doubled from 14% to 29%.

(Polly Curtis, The Guardian, 01.04.06)

Family matters

Childcare practitioners can help parents to understand how principles applied when caring for children in childcare settings can also be used at home, reports Nursery World.

The article comments that some parents are more self-assured and in tune with their babies and children, helping them to become more confident and sociable, but parents who feel insecure about their child’s development may benefit from some guidance.

Particular emphasis is given to the importance of speaking, listening and enjoying stories with children. Childcare educators are encouraged to speak and listen with children in an engaging way, as an example to parents, and to encourage parents to use similar techniques at home. Techniques include using eye contact and open ended questioning with children, sharing songs, rhymes and stories, and setting up a lending library for parents to use. Encouraging parents to learn about ‘Baby Signing’ is also suggested.

The article also encourages childcare practitioners to show parents how to cope when children are angry or upset, and to emphasise the importance of play, rest and good food.

(Nursery World, 30 March 2006)

Nursery is bad for children, researcher argues

In a controversial book, which will disturb the hundreds of thousands of parents who use both state and private nurseries, psychologist and bestselling author Steve Biddulph argues that nurseries aren’t just bad for infants under three years old, they damage them for life.

For his book Raising Babies, he conducted a review of the evidence of the effect of
nurseries on youngsters and combined it with his own research. Biddulph, a father-of-two, has concluded that children who go to nurseries before they are three have “inferior quality childhoods” that increase the risk of them suffering mental health problems, including depression and aggression, later in life.

One in five children put into nursery too early will go on to develop such issues, he says. As adults, they may turn to drink or drugs to cope. And the problem, he argues, will only get worse as increasing numbers of parents put their offspring into nurseries. With 100,000 under-threes at full-time nurseries in Britain, the numbers have quadrupled in just ten years and look set to continue growing as the government provides more spaces through its policies.

Mr Biddulph's strong views are all the more surprising because he was an ardent supporter of nurseries and helped set them up. The reason for his change of heart lies in the rising number of very young children being left in such institutions for as long as 60 hours a week. Biddulph believes that if parents really must get care for their babies they would be better using registered childminders. If they can afford it, a nanny is best because they can give a child one-to-one attention.

However, he argues that no youngster should be cared for by anyone except the parents or close family members for the first year of life. Before the age of two the most they should spend with a carer, ideally on a one-to-one basis, is one day a week. The earliest a girl should attend nursery is two-and-a-half and then only for two days, or no more than six hours, a week. Because they develop more slowly boys should not go until they are three. In short he says parents should be making financial sacrifices so one of them can stay at home for the first couple of years to bring up the baby.

Inevitably his views will cause anger among thousands of mothers whose families simply could not afford to live without two salaries. However, Biddulph is not trying to demonise working mothers; rather he is critical of the system of nurseries, which cannot give children the level of care they need.

Twenty years ago, nurseries catered only for children over three, and even then just for a few hours a day to help prepare them for school. Today in the UK around 5% of under-threes are cared for full-time in nurseries. Of these, 30,000 are not even 12 months old.

Once those who set up nurseries were idealists who loved children and wanted to help out working parents by providing the best care. Now large corporations have taken over, and Biddulph says that profit, rather than love, is their primary concern.

Staff are employed on low wages so turnover is huge and experience and morale are low. It is these changes that have convinced Mr Biddulph that nurseries stop youngsters from developing normally and prevent them learning to love, care and form strong bonds with others.

At best he says, nurseries "struggle to meet the needs of very young children"; at worst they are "negligent, frightening and bleak: a nightmare of bewildered loneliness that was heartbreaking to watch."

The research Biddulph uses includes studies by the National Institute of Child Health and Development in the US, the Government-sponsored Effective Provision of Pre-School Education study in the UK and the childcare expert Penelope Leach.
One word at a time

**Exploring children's first words can be a delightful and powerful way to expand their learning, says Kate Lee.**

Individual words have the power to inform us, move us, surprise us, amuse us and, in the case of a baby's first word, amaze and delight us. By building on the magic of this moment with foundation stage children, we can help them to see themselves as accomplished learners - and encourage an early love of words.

Most parents will be only too happy to tell you their child's first word - after all, it's one of those magical moments that usually raises a smile, even several years down the line. Ask children to bring their first words into school and put them in a 'first word box' - or you could simply record them on a large and highly visible list. If you feel unsure that all the children will be able to find out about their first word (perhaps due to adoption, fostering or other family circumstances), make it clear that they are free to choose a favourite 'baby' word instead.

Suggest they visit the National Literacy Trust's website and take a look at the Talk To Your Baby section. It contains a delightful list of first words, ranging from 'aitchoo' to 'city' (from one little boy whose dad's favourite football team was Manchester City). Children with younger siblings might like to use their brothers' and sisters' first words instead of their own.

Encourage the children to share their first words - perhaps during circle time - and then, together, make a 'first word wall'. This can include as many forms of expression as the children may suggest: colouring an outline of 'their' word, painting a picture of the object it represents, writing it down or finding the same word in magazines or newspapers. Discussions that centre on words that have special significance for particular people will help the children to see that words are not only cold, practical tools for conveying information, but can carry powerful emotional signals.

Once the 'first word wall' is made, encourage the children to decide what their favourite word or words are now. You can help them understand how far they have come in terms of their expanding vocabulary, by saying: "When you were babies, you each knew just one word to start off with. I wonder how many you all know now?" This emphasis will help children to see themselves as capable learners - a vital aspect of ongoing success with all learning in the early years.

Children could create 'my favourite word' posters showing mark-making, writing, photos, painting or drawing. This interplay between words and visual expression is particularly valuable as it helps children gain a greater understanding of picture-book stories and other forms of visually-driven narrative. Encourage children to talk about their favourite word, explaining why they like it or when they use it, and record their thoughts in sentence form as an addition to their posters.

If there are children in the class with speech and language difficulties, you can make sure they are included by asking parents or carers to choose words for them, based on their interests now, and as babies. If any of the children use signing, you could ask parents to come in and show everyone the signs which express their words.
Similarly, if children use languages other than English, ask for a translation. It's fantastic for all the children to see that different languages, including signing, can be used to express the same ideas.

To extend learning still further, take a look at the word wall created by the specialist communications charity I Can, as part of its Make Chatter Matter initiative. It contains a vast array of words from 'snug' to 'synergy'; the ones in yellow bricks are from well-known people. Anyone who visits the site can add their own word and, at the time of writing, it was already more than 12 metres long. Now there's something to inspire you.

*(TES Teacher, 10.03.06)*

**When silence isn't golden**

**You're expecting to hear your little one say 'mama' any day now. But when it doesn't happen, should you be worried?**

Waiting for your toddler's first words as other children are happily chanting songs and ABCs is gut-wrenching. Health visitors advise you to 'come back in six months', while well-meaning friends terrify you with tall tales of distant relatives who didn't speak until they were teenagers, and turned out to be completely normal!

Whatever the problem is, coping with a child who has trouble speaking creates constant worry. Language delay is on the rise, but many parents don't know what to do and the problem can become a stumbling block to development.

**Halting speech**

Speech difficulties are the most common developmental disorder in children and affect 14-20% of pre-schoolers. "About one child in 10 has a language problem due to a genetic or physical impairment, such as acquired hearing loss," says Janet Cooper, who's been a speech and language therapist for 18 years. "Those children will always need help and there's nothing parents can do to influence that. Other children may be affected by environmental factors and there's plenty parents can do to help. Even before birth, mums can start by talking to their bump!"

**Growing problem**

Experts are concerned about the increase in the number of children with language delay. Liz Attenborough, manager of the National Literacy Trust's Talk To Your Baby campaign, says: "Three-quarters of school and nursery heads think language competency in three-year-olds has declined over the last five years."

Liz thinks it's due to a combination of environmental factors. "Everything has an impact, from our busy lives to the amount of unsupervised TV children watch," she says. "And modern buggies face the wrong way. In the past, rear-facing prams provided an opportunity for eye contact and conversation."

Some parents may be unwittingly contributing to the problem, believes Juliet Woodlock, who's been a health visitor for 25 years. "One mistake a lot of mums and dads make is to pre-empt their child's need. It could be a side-effect of our very busy
lifestyles - it's certainly easier than waiting for a toddler to decide if he wants milk or juice to drink."

So what is normal?
Many parents notice that something's not quite right when first words don't come around the benchmark of 12-18 months. It's worth noting that boys are three times more likely than girls to have language delay. If your child isn't speaking, but points and understands words and simple commands, he's probably just a late bloomer. Even if it is only temporary, a language delay creates frustration as your toddler’s demands become more complex.

Around 60% of language delay cases in children under the age of three resolve themselves with no intervention - these children simply take longer to get going. The remaining 40% may be suffering from a range of physical and developmental problems, including acquired hearing loss (as a result of infection, disease or injury), a learning difficulty such as dyslexia, autism, childhood apraxia of speech (a nervous system disorder) or some form of neural impairment.

When a problem does turn out to be physical or genetic, early detection and intervention is crucial so that your child can avoid further social and emotional problems. The healthcare team involved will probably include a GP, speech and language therapist, audiologist, psychologist, occupational therapist and social worker.

Numerous tests can be done to find out the severity of the situation, as well as the underlying cause. Your child should be treated individually, helping him to find strategies for understanding language and communicating, even if that doesn't include the spoken word. Whether or not his problem can be treated successfully depends on the severity and nature of the condition. But the sooner you have the problem diagnosed, the better.

Where to get help
The first port of call is your health visitor. If you child is not yet two, don't be surprised if you're told that language delay is normal. However, if you're still worried, your health visitor should take you seriously. Juliet Woodlock insists: "I'd never dismiss a mum who was worried about her child. Her concerns will be followed up - either by us or by referral to the appropriate specialist." Liz Attenborough agrees. "Contact your speech and language therapy service as soon as you become concerned," she says. "You can always take yourself off the waiting list if things improve of their own accord."

Mum's the word
The key to solving language delay lies with parents. The more we can encourage and nurture our children’s communication skills, the more they will develop. If you're worried that your child's spending too much time in front of the telly, it's never too late to change the situation.

The Talk To Your Baby campaign encourages parents to spend as much time as possible talking, reading and singing with their child. As well as building your little one's confidence, you'll help him to feel valued, which will build on the bond between you. Whether or not your child is experiencing a language delay, there's no such thing as 'too much' social interaction between a parent and a child under five.
Janet Cooper says parents' input is paramount. "Many of them don't realise the power they have. They have all the skills - they just need the confidence to use them."

*(Practical Parenting, April 2006)*

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**British Dads are Europe's most playful**

Research reveals that British dads devote more time to playing with their children than their European counterparts. A new study commissioned by Persil as part of its 'Dirt is Good' campaign shows that fun-loving British dads spend the equivalent of a full day at work (eight hours) playing with their children every week. This is twice as much as French fathers, who devote only four hours to playtime, and more than Dutch and Swiss fathers who spend five and six hours respectively.

According to the research, playing with their offspring is the British dad's favourite pastime. In fact, almost half (46%) of the dads surveyed would rather play with their kids than do their hobby (19%), watch sport on TV (18%), go to the pub with their mates (10%) or watch a film at the cinema (5%). And seven out of ten wished they could devote more time to playing with their children.

*(SureStart magazine, Spring 2006)*

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**Webwatch**

*Liz Attenborough manages Talk To Your baby, the early language campaign of the National Literacy Trust. Here she picks five top sites that she uses at work.*

1. **Overview:** [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)
The National Children's Bureau is a really good central point of information on new initiatives, events, publications, training and resources for all practitioners in the sector.

2. **Problem solver:** [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)
This site offers advice on speech, language and communication difficulties in children, with a handy glossary, too. The 'frequently asked questions' section is helpfully split into two bits - one for professionals and another for parents.

3. **Fact file:** [www.nfpi.org.uk](http://www.nfpi.org.uk)
The National Family and Parenting Institute site is a good place for parenting facts and is excellent at keeping you up to date on research and policy.

4. **Working with words:** [www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)
Dedicated to helping children and young people with speech and language, this site has exceptional information about language and communication difficulties for professionals, parents and children.

5. **Top tips:** [www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk](http://www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk)
We now have many downloadable quick tips, as well as information sheets about
talking to young children- and some of these pages are bilingual - on our own site, alongside research and other ideas.

(SureStart Magazine, Spring 2006)

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**European Day of Speech and Language Therapy**

CPLOL, the European Committee for professional speech and language therapy organisations, held the European Day of Speech and Language Therapy on 6 March. The theme for the event was *Learning to communicate is part of growing up*, and the focus was on the development of spoken language from 0 to 3 years and the prevention of early language problems. The objective was to better inform the general public and professionals about normal development of small children.

As part of the event, CPLOL made a series of downloadable resources available on its website. These include a poster on acquisition of language that is available in 15 languages, questionnaires in eight languages for parents and professionals to become aware of possible delay in a child's development, and leaflets in 11 languages describing child language development. For more information visit [www.cplol.org](http://www.cplol.org)

(07.03.06)

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**National Parenting Academy announced**

Education Secretary Ruth Kelly has launched the Government's Respect Action Plan. It includes the announcement of a new National Parenting Academy for professionals working with children and families. It will be designed to equip workers with the skills required to address acute parenting and family problems that can be a trigger for anti-social behaviour.

To view the full announcement, visit [www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2006_0001](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2006_0001)

(10.01.06, DfES)

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**Pushchairs prevent chat**

Nearly 90 percent of parents would chat more to their baby when out and about if their buggies faced them, according to a survey by literacy charity Talk To Your Baby. Over 90 percent said they would prefer to buy a pushchair that faced them to increase eye contact and conversation with their child, but the reversible pushchairs currently available are too expensive.

Talk To Your Baby surveyed over 800 parents and early years professionals and is now campaigning to persuade buggy manufacturers to produce more affordable pusher-facing buggies.
Happy eaters

The way to a parent’s heart is through role play, as one Sure Start team has found. Judith Napier reports.

Parents tend not to be switched on by the prospect of a workshop on how to communicate with their child. But offer a bit of slapstick featuring a giant baby, and it’s a different matter. Gateshead Sure Start workers are prepared to don a bib and throw a temper tantrum for a fun way of conveying serious messages about child development.

Speech and language therapist Beryl Hylton Downing says: "My work is to do with communication, but I have to ride on the back of parents' concerns, and I am keen to jump anywhere that parents and babies have worries and where we can input into communication. Feeding is a very fraught issue for parents. If you hold an event about feeding, sleep, behaviour, you will bring in the parents. But communication on its own will not."

Beryl is a member of the multi-disciplinary team, led by health visitors and community nursery nurse Helen McIntosh, who run a two-hour Baby Bites programme at Gateshead Blaydon Winlaton Sure Start. The monthly sessions are billed as a weaning group, but the scope is in reality much wider-ranging, and includes speech and language. It is a useful way of getting communication messages across to a range of parents who would be otherwise unlikely to sign up to the topic. Feeding is something that concerns every parent. The group has attracted everyone from teenagers to a consultant psychiatrist.

I'll be mother

Beryl says parents are often so concerned about simply refuelling their child that they forget that babies might appreciate the same sorts of relaxed mealtime experiences that adults value. Instead, they are fed separately from everyone else, often with a video for distraction.

That issue is addressed as part of each Baby Bites session, which covers a number of weaning issues. Parents enjoy a small buffet and are offered practical guidance, food tasting sessions, quizzes, and role play. During the speech and language slot, Beryl (or whoever is in the highchair hot seat that day) and her 'mother' act out various feeding scenarios.

Mum may talk to a friend rather than her baby, chatter without pause, feed the baby silently, or put on a video - all missed opportunities for communication between mother and child. In the final sketch, Mum is attentive and attuned, minimises distractions, and has a conversation with the baby, allowing the baby time to respond. Group members are invited to comment on the different scenarios, and decide what works best. The parents are invited to raise any queries or concerns with speech and language therapists, and leave with a Talk To Your Baby handout.

Beryl says: "Our practitioners understand the aim of each sketch, and are prepared to ham it up a bit to make it amusing. The mums just laugh and laugh and laugh. And
it evaluates well. Parents enjoy it, they are offering solutions themselves, and remember some of the silliness of it."

**Approachable**
She believes Baby Bites works for several reasons. "It reaches a wide cross section of parents, not just the usual parents who come to everything. The group is informal, and we try not to be 'preachy teachy', and step back from the 'expert' model. Practitioners seem more approachable in this informal setting, and parents feel more comfortable talking to them."

Helen McIntosh agrees that the informal, parent-led sessions work well. "I've been involved from the start in 2004, and seen numbers build up from two or three parents to 12 to 15 per session. We have a community café at the centre and parents tell me what they've tried at home, based on what they've heard about at our group, so it's a continuous thing. Parents say how useful they find the group. And I really enjoy the role play!"

The concept is being highlighted on the Literacy Trust's Talk To Your Baby website resource. Liz Attenborough of the Literacy Trust says: "Because we thought it is such an interesting idea, we wanted to share it more widely. I am always on the lookout for such imaginative approaches. I think it shows the incredible creativity of early years professionals in finding ways of getting talk high up the agenda. This way, parents may not even know they're learning anything, they are just being amused by it."

Beryl sums up: "As far as communication is concerned, our slot means that parents are able to put baby's mealtime into the context of what they themselves feel is the ideal mealtime: good food, good company, good conversation, no rush, no distraction. And it's very simple and easy from my point of view. I can just turn up with my baby hat and do it!"

*(Judith Napier, Nursery World, 09.02.06)*

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**Video on demand**

Got a parenting problem? Well fret no more. Now you can watch selected clips from the hit BBC shows Child of Our Time, Little Angels and The Human Body. You can search by age, topic or programme whenever it suits you. Even if that means the middle of the night! For more information visit [www.bbc.co.uk/parenting](http://www.bbc.co.uk/parenting).

*(BBC Parenting Newsletter, February 2006)*

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**Parents want more information about their child's communication development**

A survey of over 400 UK parents of children under five has revealed that:

- More than half received no information on communication development during their child’s first year
• Eight in ten parents said that they would find it 'essential' or 'very helpful' to receive information about the stages of their baby’s communication development.

The survey was commissioned by I CAN, the charity that helps children communicate.

__(I CAN, 06.02.06)__

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**Turning the scales**

Most young children would turn up their noses at a dose of fish oil. But the latest trial results from Durham Local Education Authority suggest that taking regular fish oil supplements that are rich in essential fatty acids is well worth the effort.

Scientists have along been aware of the benefits of fish consumption to human health. The flesh of oil-rich fish, such as sardines, salmon and mackerel, is an important source of omega-3, which has been found to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and depression, and offer relief from inflammatory conditions such as arthritis and psoriasis. More recently, researchers have turned their attention to the impact of fish oils on young children’s concentration and behaviour. The results are impressive.

In April 2005, the Durham Trials research team launched a study into the effect of fish oil supplementation on pre-school children. It was designed to build on the success of previous research in County Durham, which had found that daily doses of supplements containing both omega-3 fish oil and omega-6 evening primrose oil, in a product called eye-q, dramatically improved primary school children’s reading and spelling skills and their behaviour. The pre-school trial will run until April 2006, but preliminary findings announced in December are already showing positive results. Now experts and educationalists are calling on the government to make fish oil supplements available free for pre-school children nationwide.

**Early intervention**

The trial involves 65 children from three Sure Start centres in Peterlee, East Durham. The children were selected for their challenging behaviour and were identified through Sure Start Peterlee’s award-winning Child Progress Model (CPM).

"The model is an early intervention programme that aims to identify children experiencing delayed developmental progress," explains Sure Start manager Brian Brown. "We screen all children at six-month intervals between the ages of 18 months and three years to identify those who have problems with attention and concentration. Durham Local Education Authority approached us with the idea of offering fish oil supplements as part of the CPM, and we were keen to take the opportunity."
Manufacturer Equazen provided the trial organisers with eye-q smooth, a fruit-flavoured paste which is easier to swallow than capsules or liquid. Children took the supplement every day and the first assessments were made after five months. At the start of the trial, 47 per cent of the children were rated as having 'poor' or 'very poor' behaviour. This figure fell to 4 per cent after they took the fish oil, and the behaviour of 91 per cent of the children improved to either 'moderate' or 'good'. Similar improvements were noted in concentration. All the children who were rated as poor concentrators at the start of the trial improved to 'moderate' or 'good' after five months.

Sure Start workers also assessed the children's language development against a control group who were not taking eye-q smooth. After five months, the eye-q group had made a 7.1 month improvement in receptive language ability (listening to and understanding instructions) and an 8.8 month improvement in expressive language ability (communication through spoken word). These gains were 2.0 and 4.7 months better respectively than the control group.

Dr Madeleine Portwood, senior educational psychologist and lead researcher on the trial, is delighted with the preliminary findings. "Many educationalists are saying that the concentration levels of children coming to nursery are worse than ever," she says. "In Peterlee, many pre-school children are below average in terms of language skills, but the fish oil supplements had such a huge impact they almost caught up to normal ability.

"The impact of the supplement in reducing children's excitability and improving concentration caused a fundamental shift towards more qualitative time spent at home. Parents were better able to engage their children in activities such as role play, doing jigsaws and, most importantly, sitting with them to read books." Dr Portwood adds: "I believe that it is the improvement in the child-parent bond in these crucial early years which has facilitated the remarkable changes in the development of the children's language skills."

**Expensive option**

Angela Froud has seen a dramatic change in her three-year-old son, Dylan, who took part in the trial. "Dylan used to be very over-active and couldn't focus on anything," says Angela. "But now he's a lot calmer and his concentration has improved. We can

**Case study: Ethan Boreland (two years and nine months)**

At Ethan's two-year check, the health visitor discovered that his speech and language development was below average. He began weekly speech therapy sessions but found it hard to concentrate, quickly becoming bored and running away.

About six weeks after he started speech therapy, Ethan joined the local Sure Start nursery. Staff suggested to Ethan's mother, Lisa, that he take part in the Child Progress Model they had developed. All children identified with concentration, behaviour or developmental difficulties were offered daily supplements of eye-q smooth.

A few weeks after taking eye-q, Lisa noticed that Ethan was much calmer than before. He became enthusiastic about his speech therapist's visits and was excited to find out what games they were playing. He managed to concentrate for much longer during sessions and his speech improved very quickly.

Ethan is now a more relaxed child and will play happily and safely on his own. He is doing much better at nursery and has almost caught up with other children in terms of his speech and language development.
go to the shops without him kicking off and he will sit and watch the TV for a long time. He also loves doing jigsaws now and he's learning to ride a bike."

Angela was sceptical about fish oils at first, but she was so impressed with Dylan's progress that she now gives her eight-year-old daughter, Rebecca, eye-q as well. "I have to buy Rebecca's eye-q myself. I don't mind because it's definitely worth the investment, but it can be expensive," she says. "I think every parent should have the chance to try it for free. The government complains that kids are skipping school and not doing well, but children should be given more of a chance. If taking fish oils means children learn more at school, then I think it's 100 per cent worth it."

At Sure Start Peterlee, Brian Brown is also keen for the government to make fish oil supplements available nationally, either on prescription or through health visitors. "If our cohort of 65 children is representative of the whole population, then we predict that about 75 per cent of children would benefit from taking supplements," he claims. "There is still another four months of the trial, but it is clear that we have very robust, quantitative data. Ultimately it is up to politicians to decide whether to fund supplementation more widely. But in the meantime we will continue to offer omega-3 supplements to children in Sure Start Peterlee settings."

As the pre-school trial approaches its conclusion, a number of new studies look set to add even more weight to the argument in favour of fish oils. Earlier this month, Norfolk County council revealed that 38 pupils from Eaton Hall Special School in Norwich will take fish oil capsules in a six-month trial. The children, aged between ten and 16 years old, suffer from conditions including ADHD, autism, Asperger's Syndrome and dyslexia. As well as investigating the effects of fish oils on the children's behaviour, the trial will test whether omega-3 can reduce the side effects of certain drugs prescribed to children with behavioural problems, including Ritalin.

The Eaton Hall trial results will be analysed by Dr Portwood, who is also overseeing a study involving pregnant women. She says: "When babies are developing during the last three months of pregnancy, omega-3 is essential for nerve growth and early visual development. If pregnant women do not consume enough omega-3 in their diet, the baby will draw on the mother's omega-3 body stores, which are found in her brain. It is possible that the subsequent lack of omega-3 is responsible for post-natal depression.

"Our study will track vulnerable mothers in Sure Start areas in the late stages of pregnancy and after they give birth. We will take measurements of the new babies to see how supplementation affects body weight, head circumference and levels of prematurity. I also hope taking supplements will lead to a reduction in mental health problems for the mothers."

Clearly Dr Portwood is confident that the latest set of trials will yield even more positive results. And as the body of evidence backing fish oil supplementation continues to grow, it will surely place more pressure on the government to make it available for children across the country.

(Liz Fox, Nursery World, 26.01.06)
Put children on the path to literacy with enjoyable experiences free from pressure, advises Jennie Lindon.

There is a great deal of concern across the UK about older children who have not learned to read, or whose skills in this area are shaky. Within the family for whom you work, parents may be anxious, perhaps asking when you will start even their youngest children on ‘proper reading and writing’.

For example, Ellie is a nanny facing an uphill task in the family she joined this month. Three-year-old Jessica and six-year-old Sam have been under pressure to follow very structured activities that claim to promote literacy. Sam is able to read but shows no independent interest in books. Jessica is willing to complete handwriting ‘homework’ from her nursery, but has no understanding of what she has ‘written’.

Five doors away in the same road, Leanna works for a more relaxed household. Heather and Gary, four-year-old twins, are enthusiastic about story books, but they have also learned that some books tell them information. There is plenty of paper with pencils and crayons, and the children regularly inform Leanna 'I've done my shopping list' or dictate what they want her to write on their drawings. Leanna’s support was welcome to the twins’ mother, since she had felt out of step with some other local families.

Supportive adults need to understand that genuine and secure literacy rests upon firm foundations in oral communication. There is evidence that anxious adults, including some early years professionals, have lost sight of the importance of speaking and listening skills. English is an especially complicated language for spelling and grammar. Children do need an approach through phonics, when they are poised to decode the written language. The key word is ‘when’. An appropriate age to begin a structured approach to literacy is certainly no earlier than five years old. Some children really are not ready until closer to six years and many other European countries do not start formal literacy instruction until this later age.

However, literacy starts from the earliest days. Young English speakers need a secure knowledge basis built on being confident talkers and creators of stories. Children benefit from developing a large vocabulary of words they choose to use in spontaneous conversation and in voicing their thoughts aloud. Well-informed nannies can provide experiences to generate plenty of reasons for young children later to want to learn reading and writing - and for themselves, not solely to please parents and teachers.

- Sam can read, but as his nanny, Ellie, can observe all too clearly, he does not feel as if he is a reader. Jessica has been drilled in the technical skills of handwriting, but she already sees writing as a task she only completes for adults. Sam and Jessica have been put under such pressure at home and in their nursery and school that they are neither keen talkers nor listeners with adults.
- In contrast, Heather and Gary understand how books work and express personal opinions to their nanny, Leanna, about story characters and plots. Their weekly selection from the library also includes non-fiction books. Heather and Gary both distinguish their writing-style marks from their drawings. They have progressed from meaningful mark-making into emergent writing.
Your professional role will be crucial for ensuring the children in your care have rich and appropriate early literacy experiences. Be ready to explain to your employers what you are doing day by day and how ordinary conversation and relaxed play in the developmentally right approach for early literacy, with experiences like the following.

Chatting matters
Allow time for relaxed conversation, just talking and listening to each other, by which young children build the skills to organise and express their thoughts. Later writing is only partly about the ability to write letters and struggle through the English spelling maze. Children need plenty of ideas for content, and the motivation to talk their plans out, before putting pencil to paper.

- Show you are interested in the content of young children's spontaneous language. Those who experience respectful attention are willing to listen in their turn. They learn about the social basis for full language and manage the give-and-take of proper conversation - very different from answering a stream of questions from a directive adult.
- Remind parents how important it is for children to be keen talkers. You can all hear the sounds of children's thinking represented by their spoken language. Children describe events they wish to recount to you, share interesting nuggets of information or use their words to plan ahead or recall 'what you promised we'd do today'. All these uses of spoken language are also potential reasons for the child to want to write something down.

Give time for stories
You can show how you enjoy different kinds of stories and include information books to tell about and picture the world.

- Make sure that books are easily available for children to access. They may like a special time in the day when you always share a story or two. But ensure that you respond to spontaneous requests to share a book at other times as well.
- Keep reading out loud to children as long as they enjoy the experience. Children of school age, who are learning to read, will find it hard work. It is crucial that reading and books do not become narrowed down just to their literacy book from school. You can select a longer book (perhaps one for older fluent readers) and read it aloud in episodes.
- Be an effective role model to children and let them see you use your reading and writing skills in everyday life. You can make a diary note of a teatime visit later in the week, or keep a shopping list updated. Let children see and hear you read instructions or signs out loud.

Pretend, sing and draw
Many simple play experiences support the skills of early literacy, with no need for adults to persuade children to get involved.

- Give children time, space and generous props for pretend play. When young children stretch their imaginative muscles, they also create narratives through words and actions. A happy experience of pretend play links with rich sources from story books, so that slightly older children are able to construct a narrative and are motivated to want to write out the story themselves.
- Value the time you give to singing songs and nursery rhymes. This experience enables young children to practise the sounds of their own
language(s), in an enjoyable and repetitive way. Be ready to join in any playful use of language, simply larking about with words and sounds. English is a difficult language because the same sound or sound blend is created in different words by different letters. Young children need to build rich experiences of sounds and 'sounds like.'.

- Let children draw, paint and play with all kinds of mark-making. Handwriting is more than learning to create the shapes of letters. Children need plenty of relaxed practice in deliberate mark-making on paper and also in playdough, wet sand or earth. They will benefit from creating and re-creating their own swirls, lines and repeated patterns.

The best early literacy experiences are simple and perhaps the most important item of equipment is a well-informed adult. You may need to stand firm, professionally, to support children in the face of outside pressures. You will see developmentally ill-informed messages from commercial suppliers keen to sell electronic learning pads and toys covered with letters and numbers, even on play items intended for under-tens. Unfortunately, some books and magazine articles suggest cluttering up daily life with single written letters or numbers. This advice often comes under a label of 'getting children ready for school'. Sadly, it can push out time for relaxed conversation and genuinely useful early literacy experiences. Any written letters, words or numbers should mean something in context. If they do not communicate a message to you, then single letters on a mobile or toy bus are meaningless for young children.

Finding out more


(Jennie Lindon, Professional Nanny, January 2006)

Baby talk - that's saying something

With speech difficulties among pre-school children on the rise, John-Paul Flintoff says that talking to toddlers is a 'civic duty'.

We're sitting on the carpet, surrounded by bears, and Nancy is shoving a slab of wooden cake into my mouth. "Mmm, delicious," I say. "Daddy want some more?" she asks. And before I have a chance to reply the next slice is on its way. Then she turns to her friends. "Bear want cake?" she asks. "Monkey drink some more tea?"

It's 11 o'clock on a Monday morning, and I should probably be upstairs working. But my daughter, aged two and a quarter, has requested that I join her party - so that's what I do. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, Nancy goes to nursery. On Mondays and Fridays she stays home. For much of the day she's looked after by a friend, but I hate to miss out on the fun. I'm constantly amazed by her imagination, and the skill with which she puts her fantasies into words. I feel entitled to some of the credit, because - along with my wife, and staff at the wonderful nursery - I have put a lot of time into conversations with Nancy.
I've read books, chatted through countless showings of Elmo, Winnie the Pooh and the Teletubbies on video; collaborated on artworks in pencil, paint and other media; struggled to maintain the purity of various shades of Play-Doh without seeming a killjoy; and helped to develop Nancy's mouse skills so that she can find old friends on the CBeebies website.

Meanwhile, nursery staff have introduced her to phrases she's since found useful at home: "Good heavens!" she said to us recently, innocently impersonating one carer. Then she added: "Tidy up, guys!" Nancy also throws back at us things she's heard us say to each other. When my wife left for work last week, Nancy cautioned her to be careful on the roads.

I'm realistic enough to accept that Nancy's language skills are not entirely without parallel in the history of humankind. But many children her age are unable to speak so confidently. In fact, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that we face a national crisis. This matters more than you might think. Plentiful research shows that speech problems lead to reading problems, behavioural problems, delinquency, ultimately even imprisonment.

You might suppose that delayed language development affects only disadvantaged children. But the problem is more widespread than that. And a contributing factor is believed to be the lack of time adults and young children spend talking together. I first heard about this while researching a magazine story shortly after Nancy was born - which partly explains why I've put so much time into our chats. Nationally, however, the problem has not gone away. A study carried out last year found that nearly 90% of nursery workers believe speech difficulties among pre-school children are increasing.

The loss of access to extended families, and the rarity of family gatherings, exacerbate the problems. And many families don't eat together any more, certainly not without the constant distraction of a television. For a time, Nancy begged to be allowed to watch television while we ate. We persuaded her to do without - at a price. To enliven meals we are obliged to roar, by turns, like monsters and lions. The neighbours have yet to demand that the menagerie be silenced.

Many timesaving inventions have likewise contributed towards the decline in parent-child interactions. Modern nappies, which can be changed more quickly than old-fashioned ones, also need changing less frequently. Portable beakers remove the need for children to ask for drinks, and for supervision as they sip. And Velcro fastenings on shoes and clothes reduce the time involved in another routine.

One other villainous development is the forward-facing pushchair or stroller. A survey carried out last year by Talk To Your Baby, the National Literacy Trust's early language campaign, found that young children spend as much as two hours a day in a buggy. "My child sometimes doesn't realise that we are with him," said one woman surveyed. "My husband has taken to walking backwards in front of the buggy just so our son can see us." Not all parents realise there's a problem with pushchairs. Liz Attenborough, who runs the campaign, points out that adults who wear iPods as they push might easily forget all about their children.

Linguists believe that humans learn language as naturally as we learn to walk. But the 'language instinct' does not make itself evidence in some children as clearly as in others. And parents may not immediately notice there's a problem, said Gila Falkus, a senior speech and language therapist based in London. "There does come a point
when it is too late," Falkus told me. "The natural development window is pre-school years. If you want normal development - which is what all parents want - it has to happen then. After that, I wouldn't say to a parent, 'Forget it, there's nothing we can do'. That wouldn't be true. But if you have developed language skills at five or six then the outlook is pretty poor."

Is social class a factor? Children from different backgrounds develop language skills at much the same age, but in professional families they gain vocabulary more quickly than in working-class and welfare families, according to an American study. Middle-class families must take some blame too, for hiring nannies and au pairs with poor English skills; and for buying expensive toys to compensate for spending long hours at work rather than giving attention to their children.

"As adults we lose the skills of play," says Falkus, "and it's difficult if you are pressed for time." However, for adults to speak to babies and toddlers - and also to listen to them, as I try to do, through the endless tea parties and elaborate fantasy worlds - should be regarded as a civic duty of the greatest importance.

(John-Paul Flintoff, The Sunday Times, 22.01.06)

Are pushchairs bad for children?

Why do so many children start school today deficient in basic language skills? Campaigners believe they have discovered one culprit: the forward-facing pushchair. The National Literacy Trust claims that old-fashioned prams, in which children had eye contact with the person pushing them, played a crucial role in developing infants' language skills. With modern forward-facing buggies, by contrast, children can spend hours a day staring into space rather than interacting with adults. In a survey of 800 parents and carers, the charity found that 88% felt they would chat more if their child faced them. But pushchair manufacturer Maclaren said that although parent-facing buggies were reassuring for newborns, older children needed to be stimulated by the world around them.

(The Week, 14.01.06)

Could your pushchair be stopping your child talking?

Pushchairs facing forward could delay your toddler's speech development. Latest research reveals that if kids can't see the person who is pushing them, they are slower to learn to talk.

That's because youngsters have less eye-to-eye contact with the adults pushing them and are more likely just to be staring into space rather than learning new words, claims the National Literacy Trust. And in their new survey, 89% of parents admitted they would talk to their toddler more if the child faced them. Few modern pushchairs allow kids to face their parents and most that do are pricey, such as the £500 celeb favourite, the Bugaboo. Now the trust has launched a campaign to encourage more manufacturers to make affordable rear-facing models.
Literacy Trust manager Liz Attenborough said: "We have plenty of anecdotal evidence from health professionals that buggies facing the wrong way contribute to poor language skills. If every parent owned a rear-facing buggy more toddlers would receive one-to-one communication." So far the campaign has found just two less expensive buggies whose seats are reversible. These are the Bebe Confort Loola Pushchair at £230 and the Quinny Buzz Stroller at £300.

But what other things can you do to encourage your youngster to talk? Here's some tips from the National Literacy Trust experts.

1. Games are a talk together. You don't need any toys, just each other. Count your baby's toes or play tickling games.

2. Sing to your baby. Your baby will love hearing your voice and any song will do, you don't have to sing baby songs. If you like the song, your baby will enjoy it too.

3. Sharing books is a wonderful way to help your child learn to talk and it's the ideal opportunity to share a cuddle too. It's good to share favourite books again and again. Repetition helps kids to remember the language.

4. Play is a wonderful way to support language development. Make lots of play sounds like "brrm brrmm" as you push a car. That way your child will hear different speech sounds and learn that listening to voices is fun.

5. Try to wean your child away from dummies, preferably by 12 months. They can help soothe at bedtime or when your baby is cross, but regular use of a dummy can create problems with speech.

6. Used in the right way TV can be beneficial - but too much can be harmful. Try to limit your child’s daily TV to no more than half an hour for under-twos and an hour for three to five-year-olds.

(Lisa Adams, Daily Record, 10.01.06)

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Hot news from the world of buggies

Ninety per cent of parents would talk more to their babies if they could wheel them around in 'sociable' pushchairs, says Nursery World (Jan 5). For the uninitiated, sociable buggies are those that face backwards rather than ones that enjoy canapés and a convivial chat. A survey by the National Literacy Trust found that if the cost were the same, parents would choose rear-view buggies over front-facers every time. Unfortunately, they’re not. A sociable buggy from 'the dearer end of the market' costs £500.

(The Times, 10.01.06)
**Let our babies face us, say buggy-pushers**

Nearly 90 per cent of parents and carers would talk to their baby more when out and about if their buggy faced them, according to a survey carried out by a literacy charity. The results are from an online survey of more than 800 parents and carers by Talk To Your Baby, the National Literacy Trust's early language campaign.

The charity is calling for more affordable parent-facing 'sociable' pushchairs, after 90 per cent of respondents to the survey said they would choose a back-facing buggy over a forward-facing one if the cost was the same. Seventy-four per cent said they would pay up to £200 for a pushchair that could face both ways.

Campaigners say that most buggies are designed to face away from the pusher, making eye contact and conversation between baby and adult impossible. Talk To Your Baby manager Liz Attenborough said: "We have plenty of anecdotal evidence from health professionals and early years practitioners that buggies facing the wrong way contribute to poor language skills."

The few buggies that do allow toddlers to face parents are at the dearer end of the market, for example the £500 Bugaboo. The cheapest buggy the campaign found with seats that can face both ways costs £230. Ms Attenborough said: "We don't want parents to feel guilty because they can't afford an expensive buggy. The call is to manufacturers and retailers to recognise this is an issue."

One respondent to the survey said: "When my daughter is in the Ergo baby carrier we have long chats about everything we see, as she is at good conversation height. When she is in the buggy (we could not afford a rear facing one) we barely talk and her view is not as good." Another mother said she felt that the fact that her baby could see her from his pushchair 'helped his confidence'.

In a statement, Maclaren, one of the largest buggy manufacturers, said it would be launching several new 'parent-facing' models this year, although it did not say how much these would cost.

*(Catherine Gaunt, Nursery World, 05.01.06)*