

# Enhancing Language

## Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

### *Aistear*

**Themes:** Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking  
**Guidelines for good practice:** Learning and developing through interactions (pp.27-51)

### *Síolta* Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

5: Interactions, C5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5

Research Digests linked to the above  
**Standards**

### Non-verbal communication

This is sharing a message using body language, facial expression and/or gestures. It involves 'rules of communication' such as use of eye-contact and turn-taking in conversation.

### Verbal communication

This is the use of sounds and words to share a message.

The quality of interactions between practitioners and babies and toddlers is important in developing non-verbal and verbal language skills and can impact on achievement later in life. Practitioners play a very important role in this language and communication development.

**Babies** are born ready to interact with people. They love being spoken to and played with, which helps their brains develop rapidly in the first two years of life. This interaction helps babies learn about language, turn-taking and listening.

**Toddlers** learn to interact with other children and adults, to express feelings and thoughts, to imagine and problem-solve. In a few short years, children are able to express themselves and use language for thinking, problem-solving, imagining, exploring, and can interact competently in a group of peers.

Below are some practical suggestions on how practitioners can help babies and toddlers to develop non-verbal and verbal skills.

- **Using eye-contact and joint attention:** You can help develop eye-contact and joint attention during playful experiences, for example, holding up an item such as crinkled paper, a shiny object or keys near your face to encourage the baby to look at you and make eye-contact. Watch as the baby looks at the item and switches attention to you and back again. This is joint attention.
- **Imitate:** Copy and repeat what the baby does, for example, if a baby bangs the table, imitate this and then wait for the baby to repeat.
- **Use gestures:** Non-verbal communication is important for helping children to understand and to use language. Help babies to understand what you say by using gestures along with spoken words, for example, shrugging and holding palms up for *All gone* or *Where's the ball?*
- **Animate:** Use expressive and animated language for babies. They love to hear expressive sounds and words such as *wow*, *uh-oh*, *brrrrm*, *weeeeeee* (going down a slide). Use animated intonation (how your voice rises and falls) as you talk, for words such as *up* and *down* as you lift the baby.

- **Be face-to-face:** Being at the level where a baby or toddler can see your face and you can see theirs allows you to take turns in conversations and see what the child is interested in. This may mean lying on the floor near the baby, or positioning yourself at a table so you are facing a toddler.
- **Model:** Support the baby or toddler by naming items in front of him/her and using the word in a sentence. For example, the child points and says, *Du*, and you say, *Juice? You'd like some juice?*
- **Extend sentences:** Add one or more words to a sentence in line with the child's stage of language development. For example, if the child says, *Gone*, respond by saying, *Your ball is gone*. The child at a 2-word stage might say, *Daddy gone*, and you can respond saying, *Yes, Daddy is gone to work*.
- **Fix-up language:** When a baby or toddler points at the door and makes a sound, verbalise the meaning for him/her, for example, you could say, *Out, you want to go out?* When a baby or toddler has pronunciation or word errors, fix-up what they say. For example, if a child says, *Dam da* while holding a car, you say, *Yes, Sam's car*.
- **Make comments:** Talk about what you are doing using simple correct sentences. For example, when dressing a baby, tell him/her what is happening: *Now we will put on your jumper, over your head first, then one arm and now your other arm*. Talk about what the baby or toddler is looking at, *Oh you see the cat in the garden*, and then wait expectantly for the child to respond.

## Supporting language development throughout the day

Opportunities for language development occur throughout the day. Talk with babies and toddlers at every opportunity. Routine activities such as getting dressed, nappy-changing and snack-time, provide ideal opportunities for babies and toddlers to hear the same words in the same predictable steps.

Activities and experiences could include:

- **Singing songs:** Sing songs such as *This Little Piggy* during care routines. As you tickle the baby's toes, make up your own song related to what you are currently doing, *This is the way we put on your shoe, put on your shoe, put on your shoe...*
- **Listening together:** Hold or position the baby where you can see each other's faces. Play a musical instrument or shake a rattle and then stop. Ask *What's that noise?* and add a gesture of hand-to-ear. Wait for signs that the baby or toddler is listening such as pointing, being still or looking for the source of the sound. Repeat the activity. Draw the child's attention to familiar noises in the environment such as an aeroplane overhead or other children in the corridor.
- **Playing people games:** Babies love taking turns in games such as peek-a-boo, tickling or bouncing on your knee. Wait a few seconds for them to indicate by a sound, eye-contact, gesture or words for you to do it again.
- **Playing language games:** Play descriptive language games such as *I spy* by giving verbal clues, for example, *I spy with my little eye, something that's green with branches*.

- **Sharing books:** Make story-time a conversation time. You can do this by encouraging the children to take the lead and see what they are interested in. Make a comment about what they are looking at or pointing to and talk about the pictures. You don't have to look at every page or even 'tell' a story, just allow the conversation to flow. For more ideas on book reading and suggested books, refer to the tip sheet *Enjoying books with your baby information for parents* or *Enjoying books with your toddler, Suggested list of books to read with toddlers*.
- Use **children's interests** to **introduce new words**. For example, if a child is really interested in farms and farm machinery, find out about tractors, loaders, trailers and specialised machinery.
- **Repeat** and **relate** words to things the child already knows to make them meaningful. Repeat new words often and relate them to different contexts. For example, to help a child understand the word *wet* talk about having wet hands when washing them, a wet day outside and a wet paper towel when cleaning up.
- **Involve parents**, for example, let them know about topics and related vocabulary you are using so they can use it at home also.

## Using play experiences to extend vocabulary

Remember, children will learn to understand words before they can say them so give children lots of opportunities to hear new, interesting and varied words. This can be done in a number of ways.

- **Model new and exciting words** for toddlers during play, for example, when using a 'doctors' and 'nurses' set, use words such as *bandage, medicine, thermometer and stethoscope*. The more times they hear the words while playing, the better they will understand them and over time, will learn to say and use the words themselves.
- When using play-dough or other sensory activities, **use words to describe** how things feel such as *wet, dry, sticky, gloopy, stretchy*.
- When tidying up, **use words that categorise**, for example, sorting items into blocks, cars and dress-up. When children learn words by categories, they relate them together and store and recall them more easily.

Reflect on your skills and personal style of interaction and be aware of the language level of the babies and toddlers. In this way, you can make sure you are adapting your interaction to their level and supporting them to develop their language skills further. You might also like to look at the *Self-evaluation Tools, Nurturing and Extending Interactions – Young Children (Birth-3 years)*.