Babies and Their Adults: Exciting Learning Collaborations that Work!

Cynthia Lashley, Ph.D.
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An eight-month-old Anna confidently announces “Bah!” to her mom who has just handed her a small orange ball. She tries to bite it but can’t. So she simply mouths it, drops it and watches it bounce then roll away. A few minutes later, for the first time in her life, mom or another family member introduces Anna to an orange – just about the same size as her orange ball. “Bah!” Anna announces proudly. She knows what a ball is! But, suddenly Anna’s understanding of the world changes when she throws it on the floor and “IT” DOESN’T BOUNCE! “IT” only rolls away! Mom, smiles, laughs at her confused expression and says, “Mija, that is not a ball – this is an orange – narraja!” Ana’s world adjusts even more when this ball-like orange is cut AND not only can she bite it but she can eat it too! Her orange ball certainly never tasted like this!

Pause and remember a moment in your life when you experienced something new and exciting for the very first time. Do you remember the joy, thrill, or exhilaration! When I remember the babies in my care, and when I see babies in my work and my personal life, I often imagine that each baby feels a similar surge of joy, thrill, and exhilaration each and every time they have a new experience because, think about it, conceivably, everything in the world that a baby experiences is a new, first time experience! “The very first “object” a baby explores is, in fact, the adult” (Biderman, Montoya & Steele, 2009, p. 9). Since the process of exploration for a baby takes place in every moment, every thought, and every breath, interactions between babies and their adults are essential.

As home visitors and Early Child Care Professionals, we must, of course, first notice, and listen carefully to parent(s)-families.* When we take the time to build our
relationships with parent(s)-families our relationships are genuine. When we have genuine relationships with parent(s)-families, our interactions with them are well-informed. These are good beginnings for any and all possible next steps that parent(s)-families, given their particular circumstances might naturally choose for themselves. When we accept wherever families are, in any given moment of time, our coordinated efforts with each parent(s)-family become part of an essential foundation for the authentic bridges that we create between ourselves and the families we collaborate with.

Our reflective process of noticing, listening and learning with the baby is an extension of the look-listen-learn approach that we use in our reflective practice with the parent(s)-families in our care. Additionally, when we notice and when we help parents notice what their babies are doing relationships between families and their babies are often strengthened. When families experience the joys of being active then parents-family members become learning partners with their babies. Dr. Alison Gopnik (1999) sums the important learning that happens between babies and their adults in the following way: "[Babies] have emotions and drives that actively cause them to explore the world and learn more. And they get much of their information from other people who are, in fact, designed to fulfill just this purpose (p. 172).

Babies learn from us – the “other people” in their lives. Babies learn how to relate to the world. When a baby is excited and an adult notices and validates a baby’s interest in the baby’s exciting new experience, the baby learns to be excited about the experience. In a similar manner when babies are excited but their adults show no interest in the babies or in their babies’ excitement about a new experience, babies learn that they are not important and neither is their interest in the world.

In the following table I will offer some possible lessons babies can learn and wording that their adults can use with their babies (in parentheses). Please note that not all cultures value or wish to talk with their children in the following manner. Nor is this meant to be prescriptive. Communicating with our babies should be spontaneous, warm and genuine. Additionally, in such contexts, a parent(s)-family members’ smile, hug, laugh, loving looks are enough for intimate moments and/or family preferences. Such immediate responses to babies still promote approval and encouragement to explore the world. They are still opportunities for learning and critical thinking or problem solving. As babies grow into young children, parents can bridge their family’s preference with the children’s preschool classes by explaining their preferences for less talk and more noticing as their preferred way of communicating. The following lessons and related comments (in parentheses) may be useful when working with parents-family members. Positive early learning experiences between babies and their attentive, and responsive parent(s)-family members have additional learning benefits that include the following.
Potential Lessons Babies Learn | Possible Wording
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Adults can and will support her explorations physically and verbally | “Yes, you can hold this orange. Let me help you.”
The process of learning is important. We won't be right all the time and that's ok too! | “Wow, aren't you smart to guess that this is a ball.”
She will have support for exploring and good critical thinking. There are different ways to think about the same thing. Thinking is a good thing. | “Hey! You saw that the orange is round like your ball. It is orange like your ball but it did not bounce. It is different.”
New experiences are joyful and good – not scary or tiresome. Joyful new experiences can be shared. | “I have to smile too because it is good that you are learning!”

When learning is interesting, shared, and supported it becomes a firm foundation for future learning. Enjoy your learning process!

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…
- What positive behaviors do you notice when you visit with parents-families and they are communicating with their babies?
- What questions could you respectfully ask parent(s)-families in order to gain information about their preference when communicating with their infant(s)?

References


*I use parent(s)-families interchangeably in this article to be respectful of the diverse configurations of New Mexico’s families.*