

First thoughts

Understanding the stages young children go through when developing their thinking patterns is crucial when supporting babies and infants from birth to three years, says *Marion Dowling*

PHOTOGRAPHS AT TREETOPS BEECHWOOD DAY NURSERY BY PAULINE NEILD

There has been a revolution in our understanding of babies. We now know that they are far more competent and capable than we ever realised. No longer do we regard them as helpless. Psychology professor Alison Gopnik summarised it beautifully when she wrote, 'Babies do not need to be taught how to think. They are born with mental abilities that fully function to allow them to make sense of experiences and anticipate future events' (1).

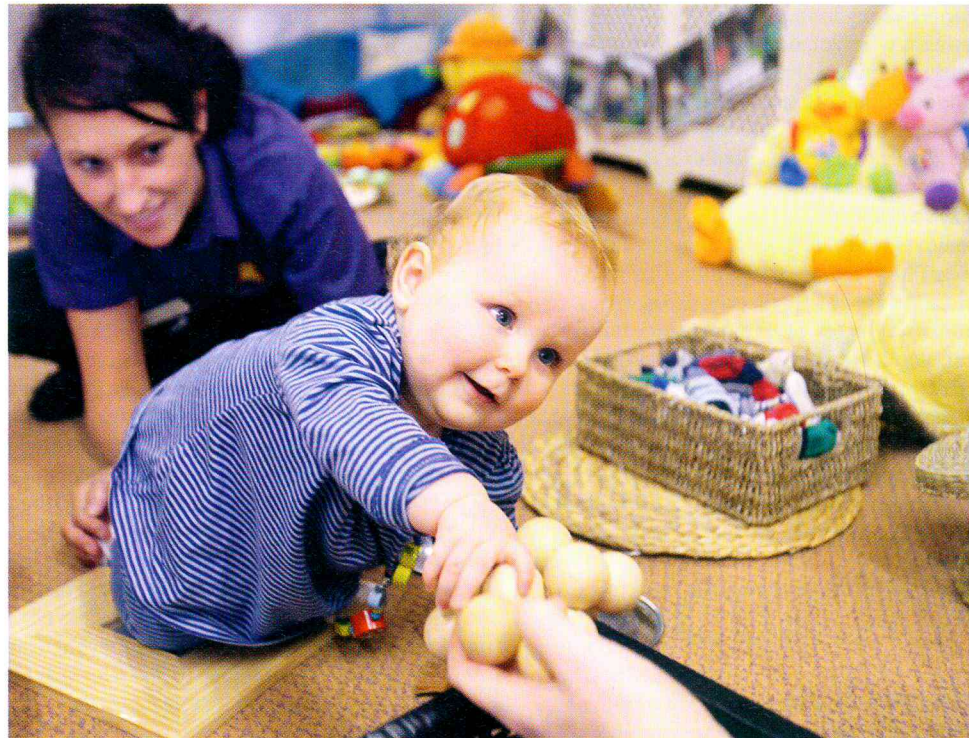
REACHING OUT FROM A SAFE AND SECURE BASE

Babies are born with a huge interest and intent to reach out and make sense of the world. From birth, babies can already recognise their mothers' voices. They rapidly become sensitised to a mother's smell and focus on her face. When a baby is exposed to experiences again and again, the delicate threads that link and connect to the brain cells are strengthened through use.

All experiences have some impact on the very young brain, but it is the consistent and repetitive experiences offered in warm and loving relationships that nourish these brain connectors and establish patterns of thinking. These early relationships or attachments involves a parent or special person tuning in to their child's needs. What interests them and how long can they sustain this interest? How do they show they are tired or uncomfortable?

Links with parents

- Listen to parents talking about their very young child.
- Encourage them to share every detail about their child's personality, likes and dislikes.
- Emphasise that this valuable information will help you to tune into their unique child.



Babies will do all they can to communicate with others through gestures and body movement

BEING AWARE OF AND IN TOUCH WITH OTHERS

Babies take a significant step in thinking around nine months when they begin to recognise themselves as separate from other people. They may follow something that is of interest to others or alert their special person to something of interest by pointing to it. At this stage, they have developed a 'theory of mind'. By responding promptly and sensitively to a baby's signals, the special person helps the baby to understand how it can gain their attention and enjoy these early moments of shared thinking.

Studies show that very young children work from a sharp social intelligence, taking a real interest in how other people close to them behave and feel. Young two-year-olds show some understanding of how older brothers and sisters will react when

Routines allow them to recognise a signal and anticipate an event

teased or annoyed (2, 3). The sympathise with a family member who is upset, but also recognise join in with a joke.

We can see for ourselves babies and infants are hungry for attention and interest from people they know and will do all they can to communicate through gestures, movements and signing, and through words.

The ability of the very young child to make meaning from what they know of the world around them is heavily influenced by their growing command of spoken language (4). Around nine to 12 months, signs of spoken language develop with babies babbling and using personal sounds to express needs and requests. First words emerge around 12 months.