

Communication, Language & Speech

Communicating means modifying or regulating one behaviour through the agency of another. It is not necessary that the influencing behaviour is generated with the object of affecting another person.

Generally speaking however, communication does take place between those who both intend to influence and who themselves have the habit of being influenced. The influencing and the influenced behaviours may belong to the same or different individuals.

Communication employs any of a great variety of media and methods, the most advanced forms being those we call language.

In child development we are concerned with communication operating in three main directions; the child being influenced by another, the child influencing another and the child influencing himself.

The child being influenced by another. The influence of others on the child's behaviour leads towards and culminates in mature verbal understanding.

At first his mother modifies the child's position and physical attitude through direct handling (passive imposition) and less directly through the effects of gravity, the shapes of the objects he comes into contact with, and the automatic responses which govern much of the young child's early behaviour. As his repertoire of movements and postures increases through learning, and changes in the form of the automatic responses take place, less complete actions on the mother's part are successful in producing changes in the child's behaviour.

The child's increasing powers of pattern discrimination, especially his ability to recognise the social-emotional 'expressions' shown by others, allows his being influenced by the activity of others at a distance. In time these activities, which at first excite only attention and pleasure, tend to become increasingly abbreviated and subtle and come to influence the child in a more specific way.

From this time onwards movements on the part of the mother (and others) become capable of eliciting specific responses from the child. For example, a mother's extending her arms and smiling as she bends over the recumbent 5 or 6 months old baby tends to evoke an anticipatory lifting of the child's head. Waving or clapping her hands tend to produce 'imitative' waving or clapping from the child.

As implied earlier the size of the movement necessary to evoke an expected response has by this time diminished very considerably and some of the more regularly elicited responses are already being called forth by a spoken phrase either alone or in conjunction with gestural or environmental support.

During the next two or three year's the child's ability to interpret conventional gesture, mime and pictorial representation, increases rapidly but speech comes inexorably to take on the role of the main and most potent influence on his behaviour. In due course the discrimination of visible gesture leads under suitable conditions to the communicative use of the written word.

The child influencing the behaviour of others. Although the mother's early handling of the child is not consciously thought of by her as communicative, much of it is intentionally directed towards producing specific responses in the child. On the other hand the child's earliest stimulation of the mother cannot in any way be thought of as intentional. Much of it in fact consists of the effects of the child's appearance or a remembered image of it in her mind.

Within a few hours of birth the baby's postural responses begin to be modified by learning and his new behaviours come to compel responses such as handling, rocking, patting, talking to him, feeding, bathing, changing him etc. from the mother. The more responsive the child is to his mother's ministrations the more the mother's behaviour is influenced by the child's. The signs of social expression, especially smiling*, invite attention with increased handling and general attention. His vocalisation in crying as well as his contentment sounds etc. bring attention, direct pleasure or relief from discomfort and soon the various kinds of expressional behaviours begin to be produced in what might be considered an intentional way. An activity, whether it be a change in bodily expression or a sound production, is produced to bring about some 'reward' such as feelings of pleasure, or relief from discomfort. At first it is the pleasurable sensation accompanying the activity which is an end in itself but from an early stage some of the activities are rewarded by the effects of changes brought about in the behaviour of others and as these become more specific so conventional systems of communication are built up. Vocalising, or blowing raspberries to attract attention, squirming and gesturing to indicate a wet or soiled nappy or need for toileting, lead under the influence of parental interpretation to the eventual use of speech to demand what is required.

The child influencing himself. From the beginning the child's movements come increasingly to influence his own behaviour through the bodily

sensations and pleasurable feelings which they evoke and which are recorded as recoverable traces within the memory. The movements also evoke postural reactions, and bring about a variety of postures incidentally which add to the perceptual experience and the incentive drive to repeat the experiences.

The 'remembered' sensations which the movements engender, allow the child to deliberately select movement patterns from his repertoire of experience, to choose which variations he will engage in and for how long.

As the child's ability to suppress or 'inhibit' behaviour which he had previously had no control over develops, greater choice and control over his own behaviour becomes possible. This growing capacity for retarding, directing, postponing and generally regulating his own actions progressively allows his submission to control by another through gesture and speech, and this leads inevitably to the child's becoming steadily more subject to his own speech patterns during the second and third years.

At this time he talks to himself directing his own activities through speech (not simply commenting on them) and in this way establishes a high level and 'finger-tip' control over his own behaviour. Over a period of months or years the actual speech becomes truncated and abbreviated in various ways, being finally reduced to a sub-vocal level and divested of the vocal and articulatory vestments.

Geoffrey Waldon '65

* Note 1, Page 2

The baby's small movements, including those of the face, are normally very varied and undergo changes due to learning, normally in association with the mother, during the very early hours. Although 'felt' and responded to by the adult the latter is rarely fully aware of these movements and is consciously much more affected by the early reflexive 'smile' produced automatically after some weeks of postnatal life.

This 'smile' seems to me to be Nature's last resort against the chance of inadequate 'bonding' during the early days and weeks.

Lack of such a smile may be the result of failure of the physical basis of the 'reflex', impaired movement of the facial musculature sensory defect, or secondary motor impairment due to inadequate affectual response.

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