

# Top Talking Tips

A speech, language and communication resource  
for the early years, from bumps to toddlers



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**We know that babies are born communicating, and that speech, language, and communication skills are central to their development.**

This resource clarifies some of the key facts around this important area of early childhood development, all backed up by early years professionals in the Bradford district and beyond. There will be many things you already know, while other things might surprise you.

To accompany the booklet there's a wallchart with some well-known activities, highlighting the reasons they are so good for speech, language and communication.

You will already be doing and encouraging many of these things within your work but may just need affirmation that you're on the right track.

While this resource was developed in response to the Baby Week Bradford 2022 theme 'Bradford Babies TALKING', the contents will remain relevant for years to come. We encourage you to keep it to hand for Baby Week Bradford and beyond.

*Where we have mentioned specific resources from other organisations, please go to the link and QR code on the back inside cover and we'll signpost you.*

# 1. Talking to the bump

**Even before a baby is born they have started their communication and language development journey.**

Bonding, attachment and those first relationships begin in the womb, and talking and responding to an unborn baby is the start of that development.

Hearing is one of the first senses to develop - babies can hear about 16 weeks after conception. By about 26 weeks a baby can start to recognise their mother's voice and can isolate familiar voices from other sounds around.

Not only can babies recognise words they hear in the womb, studies also show that they can recognise the patterns of their native language, preferring them to languages they haven't heard before.



**Watch this TED Talk from Annie Murphy Paul: What we learn before we're born**



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Babies learn to communicate through the relationships they have with their caregivers; from hearing carers voices from within the womb, making eye contact at birth to copying babbling and then words as they grow.

**Charlotte Dunster-Page,  
Little Minds Matter: Bradford Infant  
Mental Health Service**

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Babies' brains are like houses, they need building and they're being built even before they are born. When you touch, sing or talk to the bump, you're laying a strong base that will help them learn and grow.

**Big Little Moments, a National  
Lottery-funded campaign**

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## 2. Newborn babies

**Babies are born communicating. It's never too early to start talking to a baby, and every sound, cry, movement and gesture is part of their early language development.**

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It is never too early to start communicating with your baby – talking to them, using gestures and body movements, sharing stories and songs or even just telling them what you are doing each day.

**Alison Heseltine,  
Early Years Alliance**

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Appreciate the benefits of reading and singing to children early on.

**Melissa Ryan-Thomas,  
Neighbourhood Engagement Worker**

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At first, a newborn's cry can seem like a foreign language, but a parent/carer can quickly start to 'understand' and respond to their child's needs through their communication. A newborn baby will turn its head towards its mum when she speaks.

Eye contact, smiling and talking to them are all great responses to their interactions. This starts the back-and-forth communication skills that are the foundations for their lifelong journey.

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Babies can communicate before they start talking and want to interact with those around them.

They do this by making sounds - like cooing and babbling - and moving their body around to get your attention.

Try to respond to these noises and movements by giving eye contact, smiling and talking back to them.

**Bradford Speech and Language  
Therapy, Bradford District Care  
NHS Foundation Trust**

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# 3. Early communication

**A parent/carer is a child's first teacher, and it doesn't take a qualification or any special skills to start to develop the learning journey.**

John Bowlby, an early British psychologist and founder of the attachment theory, talks about the benefits of creating a strong and secure relationship to build on the social and emotional skills, resilience and language development required for life.

Harvard University talks about 'serve and return' to describe interactions between adults and children. One person 'serves' by offering a glance, a sound or a gesture, and the other 'returns' it by offering a response. These back-and-forth interactions develop and strengthen neural connections which then stimulates all future learning and development.



**This how-to video breaks down serve and return into 5 simple steps and features adults and young children doing each step together.**



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Serve and return interactions shape brain architecture. When an infant or young child babbles, gestures, or cries, and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words, or a hug, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child's brain that support the development of communication and social skills.

Much like a lively game of tennis, this back-and-forth is both fun and capacity-building. When caregivers are sensitive and responsive to a young child's signals and needs, they provide an environment rich in serve and return experiences.

**Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University**

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As a new grandparent, one of the most lovely things is chatting with our granddaughter. She takes such an interest and watches my face really carefully as I talk and sing to her. Now she is a little older she makes lots of lovely sounds in reply, such a treat!

**Alison Brown, Grandparent and Specialist Midwife**

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# 4. Learning to listen

**Children need to be able to listen, look and be attentive to be able to start learning. We can help a child build these skills through games, talking, reading and other activities.**

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework recognises that communication and language development (one of its three 'prime areas') is made up of: listening, attention, understanding and speaking.

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At Bradford Libraries we understand the importance of early communication and offer our customers lots of opportunities and resources to have fun and develop those skills together. We sing, play, listen to stories, loan books and story sacks and offer the chance to join our library incentive scheme to collect free books, bags, swim vouchers and teddy bears!

Children are ready to listen to stories right from the start – they enjoy sharing books with bold bright images and really love the sound of your voice!

**Susan-Brewster Craig,  
Bradford Libraries**

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## **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework**

### **Communication and Language**

#### **Early Learning Goals: Listening, Attention and Understanding**

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Listen attentively and respond to what they hear with relevant questions, comments and actions when being read to and during whole class discussions and small group interactions;
- Make comments about what they have heard and ask questions to clarify their understanding;
- Hold conversation when engaged in back and forth exchanges with their teacher and peers.

# 5. Turn-taking

**Turn-taking is another core skill that can sometimes be overlooked, but it's an essential skill that can be taught by parents/carers and professionals every day.**

Turn-taking is an opportunity for children to see and experience the rhythms and patterns of communication, in the same way as the 'serve and return' interactions we mentioned earlier.

It also starts building the foundations for sharing and playing with others and forms the first steps towards their social and emotional development.



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Taking turns is an important skill that we all need to learn, we use this skill in everyday life from taking turns in conversations to taking turns with activities.

There are many activities you can do with your child to help develop turn taking. You could build a tower, each taking a turn at putting a brick on or roll a ball to each other. During play make sure you emphasise 'my turn', 'your turn' so your child gains an understanding of taking turns and then waiting for their go. Add in lots of praise and encouragement too!

With babies you can encourage turn-taking by imitating the cooing sounds your baby makes and then wait to give them the opportunity to make sounds back to you.

Children are never too young to learn turn-taking skills.

**Chloe Storr, BHT Early Education and Training**

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# 6. Why play is key

Where play is concerned, people often think of things like role playing and 'dramatic' play as being key for speech and communication development.

Although this is true, **ALL** play is crucial for developing these core skills, and any play activity can help a child's listening and attention, while also helping them develop their language skills.

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It's never too early to start attending play and learn groups, make music, sing and explore the outdoors in all weathers.

**Ludmila Novosjolova,  
Neighbourhood Engagement  
Worker and Parent**

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When your baby tries to play with you during everyday moments, like when you're getting them dressed, be playful back with them. This back and forth, like a game of catch, helps them learn and grow.

Here are some of the moments you can make fun:

- Waiting for the bus
- Lunch time
- Bath time
- Walking to the shops

**Big Little Moments, a National  
Lottery-funded campaign**

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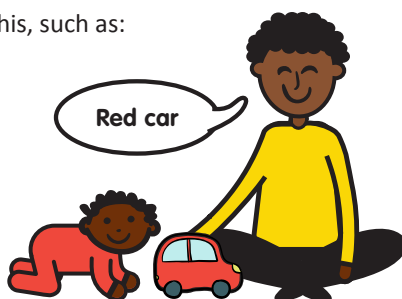
# 7. Building and expanding vocabulary

**Parents/carers and professionals are key to supporting children in expanding their vocabulary.**

There are many simple ideas that can support this, such as:

- Adding words: 'car'... 'red car'... 'big red car'
- Repeating back what a child says
- Saying what they see

The language you speak in is not key here.



**You can also:**

## **Name objects and things as you are doing things.**

Children need to hear a word multiple times before they can understand and use it in context. Even a shopping trip can be a perfect opportunity to introduce new words.

## **Correct mistakes with words or pronunciation.**

Children will make mistakes when they are communicating. Instead of correcting a mistake, just repeat the words or phrase back with the correct pronunciation or word. That way the child is being praised for trying to use the word but is also hearing the correct pronunciation.

## **Narrate a child's play.**

Use simple language and key words to describe what is happening in a game. Using a child's name or a cue word such as 'look' can help capture a child's interest, or can be used to check that they are engaged and listening.

## **Repeat, repeat, repeat!**

As already mentioned, a child needs to hear words many times before it is embedded into their vocabulary so repeat words, phrases and concepts lots of times.

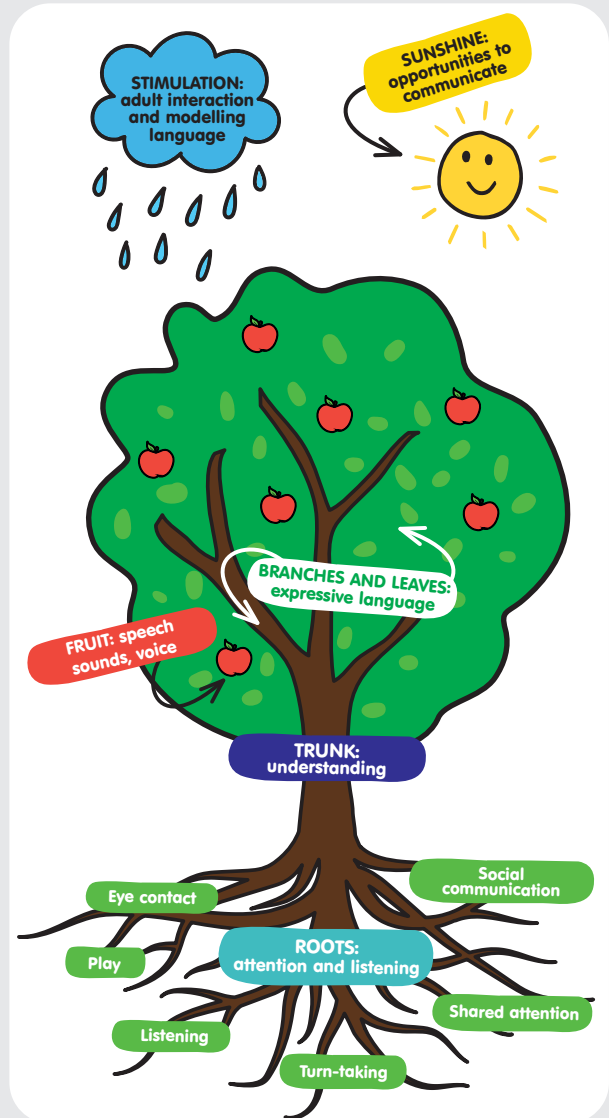
# 8. It's more than just words

While words are important, they are only one part of speech, language and communication.

Parents/carers often focus on how many words their child is saying and make comparisons with other children, but it is estimated that words make up only 7% of total communication.

As the 'language tree' and earlier sections demonstrate, communication also includes:

- Attention
- Listening
- Eye contact and facial expressions
- Understanding
- Voice
- Body language



# 9. The benefits of using home languages

**There are lots of myths around speaking in home languages/ mother tongue, but in fact it is extremely beneficial for a child to use their home language/mother tongue at home in terms of their speech, language and communication development. This in turn helps to maintain links with cultural identity.**

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We would encourage you to speak to your child in the language you feel most confident in, whether this is English or your home language.

Using the language you feel most confident in is really important as it provides your child with good language models and a strong foundation to learn other languages in the future.

However, if you feel equally confident in both languages we would encourage you to use them both with your child as being bilingual is an invaluable skill to have.

**Rebecca Heald, BHT Early Education and Training**

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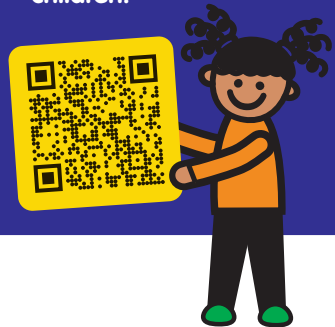
This needs to be acknowledged and encouraged.

The library has books in different languages, and YouTube has songs and rhymes in different languages that you can signpost parents/carers to so they can support this positive language development.



**Bilingual babies: Your questions answered by a speech and language therapist.**

**Watch this video from BBC Tiny Happy People with Speech and Language Therapist Monal Gajjar, all about bringing up bilingual children:**



# 10. School readiness

**Early speech, language and communication skills are vital to school-readiness, as well as being important for outcomes in later life.**

Early language acquisition impacts on all aspects of young children's non-physical development. It contributes to their ability to manage emotions and communicate feelings, establish and maintain relationships, think symbolically, and learn to read and write.

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Use exaggerated facial expressions when showing happy or sad. Expressions can be hard to read for some children. The more obvious the emotion portrayed, the easier to put a label to it.

Encourage 'looking towards the face' rather than eye contact as it can make it easier for some children to interact with others.

**Shelley Donnison,  
Social Communication Interaction  
& Learning (SCIL) Team,  
Bradford Council**



Parents/carers of young children often worry about whether their child is ready for school, but this 'school readiness' is so unique and individual to each child and family (as the advice below from the SCIL Team indicates).

Schools are well-placed to support children and their families to build on the skills already developed in the first few years of life, ensuring each child reaches their full potential.

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Being 'school ready' isn't just about having the right shoe on the right foot, eating breakfast, and arriving on time. A huge part of school readiness is about a child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

Without knowing it, your child will already have many of these skills. For them to be able to integrate into school-life, they will put into practice their skills around taking risks, asking questions, taking turns and vocalising choices.

Don't worry if your child can't do all of these just yet – it's just a guide. After all, children start school with a wide range of experiences and abilities and they will progress at their own level through the school year. Once they're in the school environment they'll also learn a great deal from their peers.

**BBC Tiny Happy People**

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# 11. Do your best

**Your job as a group or session leader is often about reassurance and modelling good ideas and good practice. You are perfectly placed to support and encourage early communication skills outside of the home environment.**

By ensuring speech and language is at the forefront of parents'/carers' minds you are helping to build a generation of happy and healthy children.

Do your best, and support parents/carers to do their best too.

The wallchart you received with this booklet gives you some ideas about how to put everything here into practice.

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As practitioners we want to foster speech and language development and support parents to play an active role in developing their child's communication skills.

Building a parent/carer's confidence, understanding and skills to fulfil their role in developing their child's speech and language effectively is crucial. Mealtimes are social experiences and we support parents to use this as an opportunity to chat to one another, building emotional wellbeing and communication skills.

**Michelle Connors, HENRY**

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## Acknowledgements

Thank to you the following local organisations for contributing to this resource:

- BHT Early Education and Training
- Bradford Council
  - Bradford Libraries
  - Social Communication Interaction and Learning (SCIL) Team
- Bradford District Care NHS Foundation Trust
  - Bradford Speech and Language Therapy
  - Little Minds Matter: Bradford Infant Mental Health Service
- Early Years Alliance
- HENRY
- West Bowling Centre

Scan the QR code for links to all the resources mentioned in this booklet



Better Start Bradford works with families in Bowling and Barkerend, Bradford Moor and Little Horton, from pregnancy to a child's fourth birthday, helping them lay good foundations that will last a lifetime.

We want to find out what works and share it across Bradford and beyond, focusing on:

- Health and nutrition
- Social and emotional development
- Communication and language

**To find out more visit:**

**[www.betterstartbradford.org.uk](http://www.betterstartbradford.org.uk)**

