



Talk To Your Baby

**The early language campaign of the
National Literacy Trust**

www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk

**Management summary of
qualitative research report
prepared for the
Face to Face research project**

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Between March 2009 and March 2011, Talk To Your Baby has been engaged in a research project, under the title of Face to Face, to identify key messages for parents and carers in relation to communication with babies and young children, and has examined the most effective ways to promote these messages to parents and carers.

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Prepared for The National Literacy Trust by Solutions

Management summary

Background and Objectives:

- This is a summary of research findings from a piece of qualitative research conducted between May and July 2010 for the National Literacy Trust to inform the Talk To Your Baby campaign.
- The objectives of the research were to identify motivating messages to encourage parents to communicate with their children under three, and to understand key ways of delivering information to them.
- The research comprised ten mini focus groups, depth interviews with 18 respondents and follow up telephone interviews.

Types of communication between parent and child

- On discussion about ways of communicating with a baby and child, different types of activities were identified which could be categorised into more 'dedicated' activities, such as reading, and less 'dedicated' activities, such as talking or singing. Time typically needs to be put aside for the 'dedicated' activities, whereas 'not dedicated' activities are more informal and typically therefore not scheduled into the day's routine.
- For parents, communicating in an informal way with their child, such as talking, was seen as a natural part of parenting that happened throughout the day. Consequently there had been little thought about this subject prior to research in terms of whether they were interacting sufficiently or correctly, or what such a level of interaction might be.
- On initial thought, most assumed that they spent a lot of time talking to their children, although they were often not considering the importance of *interaction* over talking, i.e. letting the child respond, and reacting to those responses. In contrast, communicating could mean narrating, particularly when children were very young and were not thought to understand speech.
- On consideration, parents often acknowledged that they probably did not spend as much time engaging in one-to-one communication with their baby or small child as they could.

- Some felt concern or even guilt about this, and many others could be made to feel guilty, particularly those already less confident about their parenting skills.

Barriers:

- Parents typically want to do the best they can for their children to get them off to the best possible start. However, there are lifestyle, practical and informational barriers that inhibit communication time.
- Increasing the salience and validity of communication time feels important. Parents were typically not 'avoiding' communicating with their children, they just did not necessarily prioritise it in the busy lives that they lead, or realise the importance of communicating as much as possible. The benefits of time spent communicating were not fully appreciated and were therefore not top of mind.
- Not prioritising 'baby time' over household duties was an often raised barrier for mothers when in the home, so emphasising the relevance and importance of interaction was motivating.
- Although some types of activities can suffer from parental embarrassment or concerns about skills, such as singing, or reading, for some parents a barrier was not appreciating the types of communication activities that were relevant at different stages of child development. An example of this was when to introduce books and reading to a child, or whether to engage in babbling and 'baby talk' or not.

Current awareness of and attitudes to messages relating to communication

- Parents were typically unaware of current messages to do with communicating, although in some locations eg Birmingham there was evidence of recall and a positive attitude to such information.
- Parents however welcomed information about *why* and *how* you should communicate with your child under three and actively wanted tips and suggestions.
- Fundamentally, most parents stated a desire to do the best they can for their child to get them off to the best possible start in life, and this is what drives this interest.

- The post evaluation telephone interviews conducted during the research also demonstrated that having discussed the issue of communication, and having heard about the benefits and reasons to communicate more, parents started to examine their own behaviour and some had started making changes.

Key messages

- A key stand-out fact for parents was *“Babies are born with brains that have a massive capacity for learning and most brain development happens in the first two years of life”*. This information about the rate of development at this age, was new news to most, and was a motivator to engage more in the early years and help their child get off to the best possible start in life.
- Following this information up with phrases that highlight that activities such as talking, singing, smiling and communicating with your baby or toddler helps the brain develop by stimulating it shows the importance of parent/child interaction in these early years and highlights what to do.
- This information was both a motivating ‘carrot’, but also highlighted a risk, as parents did not want to miss the window of opportunity. In fact some parents of older children could be concerned that they had not communicated sufficiently and in some way let their children’s development down.
- Parents were less interested in explanations of the science behind brain development as brain biology was difficult to comprehend, even in simple language.
- The end benefit of ‘getting a child off to the best possible start in life via well rounded brain development’ felt most interesting to parents. This could encompass learning and education, social skills and confidence. Parents were less motivated by apparent parent-focused benefits such as their own bonding, as it felt almost wrong in parents’ eyes to focus on this, over their child’s welfare or development.
- Parents liked and were engaged by messages that highlighted positives about their children’s potential, for example being told that their child was amazing already and had huge capacity for learning.

- They were also engaged by the tracking of brain development and developmental milestones, both in the womb and in early childhood. Milestones in the early months had not previously been recognised as stepping stones to speech development, and this concept was interesting.
- Parents responded less well to strong ‘frightening’ messages that highlighted the dangers of not communicating. Although these worked to scare parents, which in some might stimulate action, they risked leaving parents feeling worried and guilty.
- The risk with adopting this approach is that it can induce guilt or worry in responsible, sometimes over-anxious parents, who can be easily made to feel concerned about their own behaviour, parenting skills, and whether they were “doing it right”. This was particularly the case when discussing the impact on the brain – parents were worried about either doing something wrong, or not doing enough, and in effect damaging their children’s brain.
- As parenting and spending time with your child is a positive behaviour, that people typically want to do more of, the issue feels more about raising salience and validity, rather than convincing people to change a negative or damaging behaviour.
- However, there is also a danger in messages being overly soft, as this can falsely reassure parents that they are already interacting enough with their child. This was particularly true when considering *talking*, which parents thought that they do naturally and often.
- There does need to be some sense of urgency to drive action, but this can be achieved through giving information about the importance of the early years in brain development, how to do it, and a gentle reminder not to leave it too late.

Targeting and channels

- Parents are interested in messages about why they should communicate, and tips and advice about communication. However, because they currently do not see a need or gap in their skills, they do not proactively seek information about it which suggests this information needs to be provided for them.

- Parents feel it is important to be given information about communication in the early months of a child's life or in pregnancy, so that they are prepared for the important years ahead, particularly given there is a specific period of importance.
- The research demonstrated that information seeking before and after childbirth is different in terms of approach and channels, and this should be considered in the TTYB campaign development. Parents tended to search more online before the birth of their baby, and claimed to rely more on hard copy information after the birth when they were less proactive in their searching unless they had a problem or concern.
- Parents welcome bite-sized information highlighting key reasons to communicate, and providing advice that is practical and provides guidance across communication topics e.g. talking, singing, playing, reading, and child development stages and milestones. A key question that parents have is 'how much' time should I be doing this for?
- The key route parents imagined was a leaflet/booklet/flyer handed out by the health visitor in the early weeks of a child's life, or was available to pick up at GPs surgeries, health clinics or 'baby touch-points'. Other types of hard copy material communication may be interesting and responses highlight that they are primarily expecting this information in the first few weeks after their baby is born, and in hard copy. This reflects how they currently source information after their baby's birth, when they feel time poor and are less likely to look online unless they have a problem they want to research.
- Parents were also interested in receiving information during pregnancy to help prepare them. Parents-to-be, particularly first time parents, have more time available to them, and are more likely to search for information proactively, and to use the internet. Using the midwife was also suggested as a delivery channel. Although parents to be can be focused on immediate subjects such as foetal development and birthing, there could be an opportunity to engage them in the topic of brain development via development of their unborn baby, which would then follow through to brain development after the birth. A potential route to this could be via pregnancy planners that mothers-to-be often reported using.

- Use of other media should also be considered. Posters were well liked, and likely to be read in waiting rooms. Other suggestions included engaging parents via a selection of tips sent out frequently and exploring how to access parents at pregnancy/child rearing 'touch-points' eg Mothercare, the nappy aisle.
- Parents preferred communications that were simple, straightforward to read, had bullet pointed points/tips, and used text boxes and visuals to break up the text.