

# It's good to talk!

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Talking is an essential human skill in order to communicate our wants, needs, hopes, dreams and to make social connections with others. While infants can make their needs known it takes some time for children to achieve adult like language and communication abilities. The ability to talk is primarily developed through infants being spoken to directly from birth and through exposure to others chatting. This includes overheard conversations such as in the family home, a child care setting, the supermarket or park.

Most infants have plenty of opportunities to overhear conversations between adults or other children. This exposure is important for many aspects of language development such as learning the sounds and meanings of words and the rules of grammar. Although these lessons children learn about language are not taught explicitly by adults they are in contact with, infants take in a huge amount of information through mere exposure. However, it's important that infants are regularly spoken to directly as well.

At a young age babies obviously can't talk back and probably don't understand much of what is being said but are still communicating with us in non-verbal ways. It seems that chatting to infants encourages both language development and other aspects of cognitive development. Some research published in the last few years looked at how often mothers speak to their infants while going about other household activities such as chores. The infants were 9 months old at the time as part of the national study Growing Up in Ireland. The results showed that 65.9% of caregivers reported 'always' talking to their infant, 24% 'often' do this, and 10.1% talk to their infants 'sometimes, rarely or never'.

As you might expect, infants that were spoken to more often had higher communication scores than those that were spoken to less frequently. Interestingly though, this language based activity had a significant positive effect on infants problem solving abilities too, highlighting the importance of chatting to babies, even though they don't necessarily understand exactly what is being said and can't talk back. This finding held even after taking account of other factors that might impact on cognitive development such as the education level of the mother or the socio-economic status of the family.

Even though this research was conducted with the infants' mothers in their homes the implications of the findings can potentially be put into practice in childcare settings too. Many children in Ireland spend much of their day being cared for by an early childhood practitioner. During this time they are learning from everything going on around them in addition to particular learning, education or play activities. All of the conversations they hear involving their early childhood practitioners or parents contributes hugely to their language development. This exposure to adult conversations is important and so too are conversations that involve the baby where they are directly addressed and spoken to, whether it's during playtime, feeding or nappy changing.

Talking, at any age, also supports positive relationships and has an impact on health and well-being. So, the Aistear themes of communicating and well-being are really linked together for children and for adults too with talking in a positive way being key. The good news is that talking is free, it doesn't require new equipment or extra resources but the conversations that you have count right from infancy - so keep talking!

Adapted from: <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/blog/its-good-to-talk/> (Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> December 2018).

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