

Message of the Month—February 'Loving words help my Brain to Grow' What we can learn from research.

Why is it important to talk to children?

Talking is important for building a baby's brain. Most brain growth occurs during the first 3 years of life. Research shows that babies whose parents are tuned in and responsive to their needs and who talk lots to them develop better in terms of language, thinking and emotional well being.

There is a causal link between the amount a mother talks to her child and the size of the child's vocabulary. A child who is talked to lots develops a larger vocabulary. Children with larger vocabularies tend to go on to be better talkers and better readers. Their brains also learn how to process language more quickly.

The **quality** of parent's language input matters as well as the quantity. A child will learn more language when the parent talks about what the child's attention is focused on.

Therefore, parents should be encouraged to spend more and more time talking with their children, sharing in their interests, describing and explaining. With the increase in the number of screen devices available, research also shows that both children and parents are spending more time engaged in screen based activity and less in face to face interactions. The impact of this is not yet clear but anything that reduces the amount of time a caregiver spends interacting with a young child should be used in a balanced way—**make sure there is also lots of time for quality parent child interaction.**

Toxic stress—The way adults interact with children is important.

When a child is exposed to strong, frequent and/or prolonged hardships that are not buffered by adequate adult support, the prolonged toxic stress can affect how connections are made in the brain. A child who lives in

a chaotic or threatening environment

an environment where caregivers respond with abuse

an environment where caregivers frequently give no response at all

can experience toxic stress. This can result in the child having difficulty developing language, thinking, emotional and social skills.

If the adults in a child's home shout and fight with each other a lot, this causes stress to the child—that stress makes learning much more difficult.

A child learns best when caregivers usually behave in a calm and predictable way. When a caregiver responds in a calm and attuned way, a child feels supported and so learns to also be calm (or regulated) most of the time. This allows the brain to process information better and learn more easily.

Early Years Workers have a unique opportunity to model calm and attuned behaviour. This will help parents learn to

Respond in a calm way

Name the child's feelings -'I know you're upset'

Be encouraging—'you are trying so hard'; 'let's try it together';
'good idea'

Be kind about their child rather than critical

Share in the child's interests

Talk about what the child is interested in

Use comments, rather than ask questions that test the child e.g.
rather than asking 'what colour's that?', say 'I like your green car'

These strategies have all been proven to be important in helping a child become a happy child who is ready to learn.