



Exploring babies' and young children's development and learning

Infants' understanding of other people

I'm David Messer, I'm Professor of Child Development and Learning at the Open University. I began my research career actually working with Rudolph Schaffer as his PhD student, and what we were looking at is mother-infant interaction and the communication between mothers and infants.

In part of Block 1 what we look at is different views about infants' understanding of other people. One group of psychologists in a sense take a very rigorous view about what capacities infants have, and they suppose that actually there's very little there. In a way infants have got to learn about the environment around them, and they've got to learn what people are and why people are relevant to you as a baby. And there's an opposing point of view and that is that actually infants from an early age, possibly even from birth, are tuned in to, respond to other people in their environment so, if you like, infants have a special ability, an innate inherited ability that means that they at some sort of level understand that when they're dealing with a person that's a different thing than, say, a tree waving on the lawn, that they're dealing with something that's got feelings and that can relate to themselves.

So there are these very different views about infant capabilities, and they also involve different kinds of research traditions. In a sense it's very easy if you're a sceptic about infant abilities to say, well, where's the hard proof about these fantastic capacities that an infant has and, on the other hand, there are people who say well, you know, you can just feel it when you're with a baby, that baby seems to know me, and so that there's a very different opinion about what is there inside the baby's mind.

Now these issues are picked up in two of the interviews that we have on iTunes. Suzanne Zeedyk is very interested in the process of imitation, and not just the process of infants imitating the adult; as probably a lot of you know that if you stick out your tongue to a new born baby that new born baby is likely to stick their tongue back out at you, so new born babies have a fascinating ability to imitate others, but what Suzanne is also interested in is the way that adults in a sense mirror back to infants what is their own behaviour and that interesting juxtaposition of what I do and what someone else does provides infants with a cue to well, what's going on out there, I know that there's someone that's perhaps a bit similar to me doing the same thing as me, and what Suzanne is suggesting is that through this process of engagement infants start to understand themselves, and understand themselves in relation to other people much better through the process of social interaction and imitation.

For students who are taking this you'll see in a baby lab, young infants interacting with their mother, and you'll also see Suzanne both comment on these interactions so she's pulling out the bits of the interaction that she thinks is interesting, but you'll also hear her talk to one of the mothers and discuss whether she thinks her baby, who's around eight or nine months, is actually teasing her or not, and the mother has this opinion that the baby is teasing her. And again that's quite a sophisticated activity when you start to think about it in more depth, that this baby who can't even use language, is actually kind of juggling with her mother's emotions.

We were very pleased that Professor Vasu Reddy gave us an interview about babies' thinking and about her work with teasing, and it's interesting because quite a few years ago I was a press officer for the developmental section of the British Psychological Society and we did a press release on Vasu's work where she said even young babies are teasing their parents, and the newspapers just went wild about it, they were fascinated with the idea, it clearly hit an area of interest that goes across a vast number of different people, and also different forms of media. I mean she's interested in teasing in a sense because it's giving us an insight into the

sophistication of infant thinking that the infant is able to think both what a person wants and then reverse it, if you like, and do something that the person doesn't want, so they're showing quite a sophisticated understanding of what's going in the other person's mind. And I think, as Vasu admits, that the whole process of studying teasing, or anything that's going on in a baby's mind, is very difficult. But she also thinks that if we try to be too rigorous about our objectivity and what can and cannot be inferred from behaviour then we might, to use an unfortunate pun, throw the baby out with the bathwater, because we will lose our understanding of what really is happening there.

And an important message, I think, coming from Vasu's interview is the way that engagement provides a basis for further understanding on the infant's part, so what's essential is the carer, the mother, and the baby, all interacting and coming to understand each other through the process of social interaction, and out of that comes a deeper understanding on the infant's part of what other people are like.