

The role of symbolic gesturing in family communication

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Abstract

Background to the research or performance/installation

Research examining the impact of symbolic gesturing has predominantly focused on the effects of such programmes on the cognitive development and language acquisition of the infant, with experience of using symbolic gesturing indicating faster language acquisition and higher IQ.

Interdisciplinary issues

Extending understanding of the value of symbolic gesturing is of both practical and theoretical significance to early years practitioners, psychologists, linguists and musicians.

The issue/hypothesis under investigation

The purpose of the present study was to examine the role of symbolic gesturing, focusing particularly on the development of communication models between siblings. Among the hypotheses advanced, this study proposed that symbolic gesturing would enable young children, in this instance siblings, to more successfully initiate communication and episodes of interaction.

Findings/Description

Participants included 93 infants divided into three groups, one group of 'signing infants' with older 'signing' siblings, a group of 'signing infants' with no siblings, and a control group of infants / siblings who had not participated in any signing programme. Analyses indicated that infants in the symbolic gesturing group participated in joint sibling interaction more frequently. In addition, infants in the same group initiated sibling communication significantly more often, with evidence of spontaneous gesturing being used between siblings.

Conclusions/future directions

The pattern of results supports the hypothesis that symbolic gesturing may make a positive contribution to the development of communication within the family unit, in particular in the development of both siblings language and communication skills.