



## Getting to know *more* about you

Last time, we considered how our young children are little sponges, absorbing everything and they are internally driven by a hugely powerful life force. As babies and toddlers, they do this without thought and are not able to reason. As they get a little older, they begin to be more deliberate, making choices about the experiences they want. Fundamental to everything is the motivating driving urge within.

As we get to know *more* about our little ones, we find that there is more to understand.

### Let's setting the scene...

When did you see a young child want to do the same thing over and over and over!?

Did you find it funny, bewildering, exasperating??

## Windows of opportunity; periods of special sensitivity

There are times when our youngest children are especially sensitive to certain experiences. Directed by the same powerful inner urge, children are driven and motivated to behave in certain ways. As adult carers recognise this, we have a vital key to understanding our child(ren). We can begin to work *with* what their child is predisposed to experience. These windows of opportunity can be transformational.

### What are these windows of opportunity?

It might help to visualise sensitive periods as puffy fair-weather clouds (cumulus). Such clouds move fluidly, passing over one another, breaking up, reappearing again. Dana describes them as times when something in their experience is magnified and brought into sharp focus.

All young children pass through 6 different windows of opportunity. These 'cloud' windows look different for each child. They come at different times, some overlap, others re-emerging a little later. They provide our children with the best conditions for children to learn **effortlessly**. These windows of opportunity do not last forever. After they have passed, children are never again able to learn with such ease. (You may wish to research further into *neural pathways, synapse connections* and *synaptic pruning* in early years).

There a broadly six 'windows of opportunity', which, we shall consider in no particular order.

### A window for movement

Opposite me in a busy railway carriage were a mother and her two-year-old. Mum was encouraging him to sit on her lap or at least next to her. Both toddler and carer were physically strong; and the child simply wanted to move. He squirmed and wriggled. Mum encouraged him to stay close to her, not wishing to disturb the other passengers. Her *not-so-little* mover then found alternative ways to move; climbing onto and over her, wriggling, squirming, and pulling on the firm handhold that mum used to anchor him to her. This pattern of behaviour that lasted the entire 50-minute journey. By the time they alighted in London, Mum looked exhausted, and her child was unhappily strapped into



the pushchair. It was clear that the child's need to move was restricted. As he was not able to move as he wished, he sought any other way he could to move... and his poor mother became a sacrificial climbing frame!

### Was this toddler really being difficult or naughty?

This young child was single minded. His focus was his need to move. Recognising and interpreting his behaviour through the 'window of opportunity' lens is helpful and provides an interesting perspective.

Movement has been described as an infant's first language. Babies will stretch and reach towards something that interests them. They begin to roll over and in time belly crawling. If babies are prevented from using their whole bodies this way, their later development is likely to be impacted.

We will return to this in Delving a Little Deeper Set 2.

### A window for developing socially

Ella (3) always seemed to be playing with her friends. Her room leader had noticed that Ella was not making progress in certain areas and had drawn this to the attention of her key person - Marc. The problem was, every time Marc invited her to engage in a suitable planned activity, her attention was not on the activity, and she kept asking, "where are my friends?"

### Why was Ella so reluctant to do an activity that Marc had prepared for her?

This very common example reveals something that many practitioners tend to forget. She is now a social 'little sponge' and is absorbing things consciously. With this understanding, we should recognise that children in this sensitive period will work best in small friendship groups.

### How else can we support children in this window of opportunity?

Some settings support children's social development as part of their daily routines (freedom to work alone or in a group, turn taking, sharing, mixed ages). Children in these environments learn to respect one another, negotiate, greet others, and take responsibility to look after their shared spaces. Marc found that Ella was distracted by her absent friends. She could not focus on the activities that he had planned for her. When he recognised this, he went on to plan suitable small group activities for her. The problem disappeared as she engaged in the same activities alongside her friends. Her social window of opportunity was satisfied.

Children who are socially sensitive are also energised and eager to absorb social difference. This is a key time for practitioners and parents to offer experiences for children that are broader than the social norms of their culture. Children are socially motivated, absorbing and accepting everything. The child who lives with prejudice or intolerance, will unconsciously absorb and accept the attitudes they are exposed to. Settings that offer a



good range of cultural experiences whilst children are in a socially sensitive period do much to counter intolerances in individuals and the broader society.

### A Window on Order

Mark loved small world play - trains, cars, dinosaurs, farm animals... But he often did the same thing with them. He would line them up so that they stretched along the floor mat (and beyond). A friend of the family noticed this and one day remarked, "Doesn't he have an ordered mind!" His mother laughed in her response, saying, "Really? I think it is because he's used to sitting in traffic jams!" But the mother was curious and went to find out more... and so began her journey of discovery and wonder of what else she might understand about her child.

Whilst it may be true, the toddler did spend time sitting in traffic jams, there is something else going on here. Mark was learning to make sense of his world and revealing that he was in a window of especial sensitivity for **ORDER**.

### So... if they have a sense of order, why are children such mess-makers?

It is true adults find it difficult to accept that their reasonably ordered adult world is transformed into chaos with the arrival of their new-borns and only increases as they grow older.

Aged just two, Mark's behaviour was a window on what were his inner motivations. To his mother, stepping over the lines of cars stretching across her rooms, it was irritating and untidy! As she learnt more, she began to recognise that Mark's ordered mind would be informing the development of his Mathematical Mind. If this was supported (which it was) he would benefit intellectually (which he did). We will return to Mark in future episodes to see how.

### A Window on Language

Giulia lived in a small region on the borders of Italy and Austria. All children in this region were required to learn three languages - the regional dialect, Italian and German. One of Giulia's parents was Italian (speaking the local dialect) and the other American (speaking English and Italian). Giulia therefore heard three languages spoken at home and therefore absorbed all with ease. Such a gift!

As an adult, she went to work in Spain for a while (and quickly became fluent in Spanish); she travelled for work across Europe (and picked up a host of other languages: Hungarian, Slovakian, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Estonian, Latvian...). She then lived and travelled in the England for 5 years, picking up UK regional dialects, phrases, and idioms, understanding and using them in ways that many British people could not.

(Listen to Giulia's story in Turning Little Stones Season 2; episode 1)

Babies can hear before they are born. They can hear before they can talk. As little sponges they absorb the language(s), dialects, and idioms effortlessly.



### Does this sensitivity to language affect just language acquisition?

Language involves so much more than expressed language (orally, reading & writing). Julia heard the various languages spoken long before she could articulate them. Simply absorbing three spoken languages whilst moving in and out of these periods of sensitivity, informed her linguistically and intellectual capacity to adopt more and more languages. Her musicality was also informed (the cadence and pattern of speech, nursery rhymes etc.)

Returning to Janey's children, Joe and Jody (audio 1), their bedtime, story-time routines will affect their later childhood and into adulthood. The bedtime routines involving rhyme and stories will mean they are likely to continue to enjoy reading and poetry. Children exposed to rich musical experiences will benefit from appreciating and playing music.

### Windows on Small Things and Senses

Children in a rural nursery were sometimes treated to the spectacle of bird migrations. Most striking were the flocks of geese flying in a V-formation above their nursery garden. These geese, preparing for their long migration, gave a regular spectacle over a few days. They flew low, honking loudly. Curiously, when the practitioner pointed it out to the children as a point of interest, most took little notice in the noisy spectacle.

However, Ben would be able to hear and spot the most distant aeroplane flying high in the sky. He was eager to point out this and other aircraft to the practitioner. Some were easier to locate than others. When they were flying very high, it would take her some time to locate his point of interest. She was curious. Why was he so fascinated by the tiniest speck high in the sky – something that was barely audible, when he paid such little attention to the geese?

From this example, we can consider the last two periods of sensitivity. Ben's behaviour suggests that both are overlap at this point of time.

The **Window on Small Things** explains Ben's ability to see something that was barely visible to adults. Tiny things captivate them, and their focussed concentration can be directly linked to their developing intellect. They learn to track with their eyes and their fascination for tiny things open pathways and possibilities.

The **Window on Senses** explains Ben's ability to hear aircraft sounds and his fascination for sounds that many adults lose if they are not exposed to them in their earliest years.

Ben was born with the capacity to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch (as most of us are). Often their world is filled with a confusing array of sensory impressions. As adult carers recognise that young children learn through their senses, we will want to reduce any distracting stimuli so that children can benefit the most from this window of opportunity.

For Ben, his sense of hearing was sharpened as practitioners followed his focus and celebrated his fascinations. Who knows what opportunities they may unlock in later life?



### How will refining his sense of hearing help his learning and development?

Ben's window of opportunity at that time was his sense of hearing. His sense of hearing was sharpened through attentive listening. He noticed the volume, contrasting it with other aircraft flying at different altitudes. Attentive listening is different from hearing and caused him to notice, compare, distinguish sounds. All will inform his intelligence. This window of opportunity (as with all the others) is directly linked closely to the growth of intellect.

### The tell-tale signs

The above examples help to shine a light on six windows of opportunity that all children experience uniquely. The best way to identify them is through recognising some tell-tale signs and observation.

Over time, those who consistently practise through careful observation and reflection will find them easy to recognise.

Asking these simple questions will help us to tune into which sensitive period a child is passing through at any given time:

#### Let's consider a little...

Take some time to observe a child's behaviour...

Using these questions, see if you can identify which 'window of opportunity' your child(ren) is in...

- ? What is my child(ren) doing when they become totally focussed?
- ? Does my child(ren) want to repeat and repeat the same or similar activities, without tiring, being distracted or becoming bored?
- ? When they come to the end of what they are absorbed in (without being distracted or interrupted), do they seem contented and deeply satisfied?

And... begin to observe and interpret children's behaviours through this lens. How does it change your attitude?

**CELEBRATE & SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS WITH OTHERS ON THE MEMBERS FORUM!**

**Further information, practical guidance and advice are available through**

*Turning Little Stones &*

***Delving a little Deeper***

*See website for details.*