

## CHAPTER 15

# The Power of Pause

## Moments of Silence and Early Emotional and Language Development

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During my 22 years in the field of early childhood education, I've noted the benefits of silent moments to support both emotional and language development in infants and toddlers. In this chapter, I explain more about the connection between teachers incorporating moments of silence and children's development in these areas. I offer several strategies you can use to embrace these moments of silence in your interactions with young children and to reflect on that practice.

### Intentional Silence to Support Emotional Development

For 15 years, I mentored undergraduate and graduate interns, who were pursuing a degree in child development, in a laboratory school setting. One intern, Sheerin, asked for my help with an inconsolable 8-month-old baby. Sheerin was frantic and tried everything she could think of to help the child—putting her down for a nap, changing her diaper, and feeding her. Still, the child wept. I calmly approached Sheerin while she, the other interns, and the children were all sitting on the floor. I told her, “Just be with her in her distress. If you assure her that you are there for her with your calm presence, you do not need to say a word. It will be all right.” Sheerin did exactly that, and slowly but surely the baby calmed down.

To process our thoughts, we need silence. We tend to focus better in a quieter environment, and silence helps restore our finite cognitive resources. Indeed, “silence is crucial for the mind to register information from its surroundings; thus, it is inactivity, generally in silence, that stimulates brain activity most” (Brown 2019, 28). In an age that seems filled with loud sounds and distracting noises, silence is essential.

We often underestimate the power of our silent presence to help us form a deep connection with a child. An adult's intentional silence is an intervention strategy during a child's emotionally loaded moments of distress, helping them to learn the language of co-regulation (Tavares 2022). I've come to think of this as “loving silence.” Loving silence speaks to what is underneath the behavior and creates space and time for seemingly uncomfortable emotions to be honored, attended to, and recognized. While it's easy to write about this strategy, it can be very difficult to put into practice. Yet young children depend on intentional teachers to guide them in learning about and navigating their emotions.

### Pausing to Support Language Development

In my work with infants, I have seen the power of pausing. Pausing gives time for a baby to process the sounds of the words they hear and to respond in the way they want to respond. Infants' brains are just beginning to understand the various sounds needed to form words. This typically includes the pitch of our voice (Kuhl 2004), which usually goes up when we ask a question. Too often, babies are not given time to process what they've just heard before more questions are asked of them. By frequently pausing, an educator can give an infant or toddler time to vocalize. This can turn into an alternating exchange between them—where both are active participants. An infant's active participation in vocal exchanges, together with adult language input (Soderstrom 2007), lays the basis for child speech and conversational development (Golinkoff et al. 2015; Oller et al. 2019). Reading books, narrating what you are doing, and singing rhymes and songs are all crucial for early language

learning and development, but pausing and silence are important too. I've learned that if I pause, infants and toddlers respond.

To try this out, ask an infant one question, then look them in the eyes and pause (try counting silently to three to remind yourself to pause). In my experience, most babies respond when there is a bit of a pause. They smile, coo, say "ahh," or babble. As an extension of this, think about words and phrases that they hear over and over, which invites very young children to notice patterns in sounds. For example, infants can start to notice patterns in the sounds of familiar songs (Holliday, n.d.). Try leaving out the last word of a favorite song. You may be surprised that infants and toddlers can finish it for you. A pause helps them begin to experiment with sounds and even words. When we include silent pauses in talking (and singing) with infants and toddlers, it helps support their early language learning and development.

## The Importance of Reflection

Part of respectful and responsive infant and toddler education is providing the time and space for them to respond. This takes patience and practice on the part of the early childhood educator. Reflecting on your practice can help us understand and appreciate the role of silence in young children's development.

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Listening and seeking to understand what children may be trying to communicate provide a starting point for reflective practice. By learning from children, teachers recognize and build on their multiple assets and strengths.

As a mentor, I have taught interns how to journal their interactions with infants and do careful observations of others' turn-taking interactions with infants. Journaling and observing are important skills for early educators. They can enhance our practice and deepen our understanding of why we do what we do and how we might improve our practices. Reflection is integral to intentional, effective teaching.

To try this out, notice what happens when you pause: before forming another sentence during an interaction with a baby, what do you observe about the infant and about yourself? What effect does pausing have?

You may find that the power of pause affects you too.

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