

Editorial

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As we launch Issue 2 of the Malta Journal of Health Sciences (MJHS), I would like to share with you some thoughts on one particular topic which I hold very much at heart, namely children's language development. In particular, I would like to highlight the importance of social interaction in helping children to develop into effective communicators.

The complex process of language learning is grounded in the child's social experiences. In the months preceding the emergence of language, babies thrive on the attention, smiles, language input and physical contact of their caregivers. Early communicative exchanges drive them to channel their reflexive actions and vocalisations into purposeful ones. In early language learning, the child depends on social interactions with significant others to be able to forge links between the speech sounds and meanings they receive in their input. Language needs to be experienced naturally, as it is used to identify and describe entities, persons, objects and experiences in daily settings. Interactive experiences help the child to crack the language code and realise the value of language in enabling a wide range of communicative functions. As children's language capacity expands, communicative exchanges allow them to practise available language skills and develop new ones.

Experiencing the communicative potential of language is priceless for language-learning children. It is not merely a question of exposing the child to the ambient language. While technology may assist the child's language learning, it is no substitute for one-to-one interactions in encouraging the uptake of language. Strikingly, children are extremely adept at using technological devices and applications, to the extent that they often become engrossed in them and ignore other forms of input. Although such devices can be useful and educational in their own right, they surely cannot make up for the rich language input that may be derived from meaningful one-to-one or group interactions. These not only

support language development but also assist the learning of social rules for communication. The sheer beauty and effectiveness of simple, face-to-face exchanges tends to be under-estimated. Communicative exchanges in everyday contexts provide children with the necessary tools for learning language and developing social skills. Through social interactions, infants and toddlers learn the basic components of language and test their newly-acquired skills in real-life settings. Involvement in social exchanges enables older children to learn the rules for social language use and to practise organising multiple thoughts in a coherent sequence prior to verbalising them. Participation in conversations equips them with skills for understanding and using shades of humour and sarcasm, among others. Importantly, they also develop an appreciation of others' perspectives and emotions, while developing their own. These are but a few of the advantages that may be derived from encouraging children's involvement in social exchanges.

In today's day and age, isolation from face-to-face communication has become acceptable. However, we cannot afford to have our children detach themselves from social exchanges. To reap the full benefits of the technological facilities available today, they can be focused on and explored in interactional exchanges. Children can be encouraged to share, describe and discuss their favourite gadgets, programmes and applications. This should go a long way in encouraging them to appreciate the social dimension of language and become truly effective communicators.

Having aired my views on the importance of social engagement for children's language and communication development, I now invite you to explore the articles in this issue. The diversity of topics should make for interesting and intriguing reading. I trust that these papers will spur us on to engage in further health science research.