



EXTENSION

# Nurturing Your Baby's Social and Emotional Growth

August 2020

Ruth Slocum

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Jens Jespersen

Graduate Student, Human Development and Family Science

Amanda Sheffield Morris

Regents Professor and Child Development Specialist

New babies come with many needs and no owner's manual. They cannot yet use language to tell us what they need. Sometimes, figuring that out might seem like a mystery. This can make it difficult for new parents to know how to best help them grow, develop and be ready to learn.

As soon as a baby is born their brain is ready to use their experiences to begin building the foundation for all learning – about how to get what they need, relationships, the world and their place in it. Their mental and physical health are very connected and will be affected by what they experience during the first months and years of their life; in fact, the most critical brain development occurs in the first three years of life.

## What is Social and Emotional Development?

Social and emotional development is the developing ability of the infant and toddler to:

- Form close and satisfying relationships.
- Experience, control and express a full range of positive and negative emotions.
- Explore the environment and learn within settings of family, community and culture.

## How To Help Babies Form Close and Secure Relationships

Babies form secure relationships early in their lives by building bonds with family members, getting help in managing their feelings, and by having opportunities to safely explore. Parents play a major part in developing these relationships, and can help by the following:

### The Bond – How to build the bond

- **Respond** – Your baby needs to know you will be there when they need you. This means responding quickly and warmly when they cry. Babies with parents who respond to cries actually cry less than babies left to cry it out.
- **Follow their lead** – Notice what they are paying attention to and build on it. For example, if your baby shakes a rattle, you might pick it up and shake it too. To build on this, you could tip it back and forth in a slightly different

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manner. You can also follow by repeating the sounds they make. This lets them know they are important and helps to build their brain in ways that will benefit them for years to come.

- **Show delight in what they do** – Showing genuine interest in your baby's activities and efforts will help build their self-confidence. Pay attention and offer a simple "you did it!" and smile when your baby succeeds at something they are trying shows interest and delight.
- **Avoid scaring them** – Yelling or using harsh or unexpected behavior with your baby can cause fear. As you work on building this relationship, it is important they trust you and are not afraid of you. As they get older, they will be more likely to come to you when they need you because they will not fear you.

### Emotions – How to help manage feelings

- **Comfort** – It starts with babies being comforted when they are very little. A new baby is not able to comfort themselves when they are in distress. They need their parent or caregiver to help by showing warmth and holding them close. Gradually, they will learn to soothe and calm themselves.
- **Feeling words** – Big feelings like anger and sadness are easier to handle if they have names. Parents can help their baby learn this by giving them the words for what they feel.



- **Feelings are okay** – Everyone has big feelings from time to time. Try to give your child the message that their feelings are okay. If they express big feelings in ways you don't like, talk about the behavior, not the child. Tell them what they CAN do when they have those big feelings. If your child is upset you might say something like, "I can see that you are sad. It's okay to feel sad. Do you want to sit with me and talk for a minute?"

### **Exploration – How do babies learn about the world? They EXPLORE!**

- **Senses** – Babies quickly begin using all of their senses – including putting things in their mouths.
- **Safety** – A part of a parent's job is to make it safe for their child to explore.
  - Put breakable or potentially harmful items out of reach.

- Make sure to remove anything small enough to fit inside a toilet paper roll, so they won't put anything in their mouth on which they could choke.
- **Delight** – Let them know that it's okay to explore by watching them and taking delight in what they are doing and learning – as long as they are safe.
- **Welcome them back** – When they come back to check in while exploring, make sure to welcome them with warmth and kindness. This will help them know you are their secure base.

### **Conclusion**

As their parent, you are your baby's first nurturer, teacher, advocate and protector. It can take time to learn how your baby communicates needs and feelings. But taking the time to build the bond and respond to their feelings helps them feel secure enough to explore and learn. These social and emotional building blocks will serve them for life.

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