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Teaching Your Child About Feelings: Birth to Age 2

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

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Teaching Your Child About Feelings

from Birth to Age 2

Does This Sound Familiar?

Damon (6 months) and his sister Karennia (20 months) have arrived at their grandmother's house for the day. Even though this has been the morning routine for a few months now, Damon cries and cries when his mother leaves. He is almost inconsolable, and it takes a great amount of time and comforting for him to calm down. Meanwhile, Karennia is pulling on her Granny's arm. She wants to play with her doll stroller but it is in the closet and she can't turn the knob. She is not happy about waiting for her grandmother's attention. Karennia swats her little brother, stamps her feet, and pulls on the doorknob with all her might.

What would you do if this happened in your home? Would you be feeling a little frustrated with one or maybe even *both* children? Or would you be able to hang on to that little piece of calm inside yourself and find the strength to soothe both your little ones?

The Focus

Young children experience many of the same emotions adults do. Children can feel angry, jealous, excited, sad, silly, frustrated, happy, and worried. The difference is that very young children—ages birth to 3—often lack the self-control and language skills to express their strong feelings in ways that adults find acceptable. Instead, babies and toddlers communicate strong emotions through their sounds and actions. For example, Damon cried to show how difficult it was saying good-bye to his mother. Big sister Karennia used her body—swatting, stamping, and yanking—to show her frustration with waiting and her desire for the doll stroller.



What to Expect: Social and Emotional Skills



Sometimes it is hard to imagine that very young babies are actively learning all the time, especially when they seem to spend most of their time sleeping, spitting up, or dropping strained carrots off the side of the high chair. However, these early years are a critical time of learning for babies and toddlers. They are developing a foundation of social-emotional skills that they will build on for the rest of their lives. Here is a table that highlights the social-emotional skills your child is learning and practicing at different ages. You can use this information to track how your child is growing and changing from birth to age 3.

GREENSPAN'S ESSENTIAL DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Developmental Goal	Age Range	What's Happening?
<p>1</p> <p><i>Stage One:</i> Being Calm and Interested in All the Sensations of the World</p>	Approximately birth to 3 months	<p>Your baby is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning how to be calm, how to accept soothing and comfort from a loved caregiver. • learning to feel secure and interested in the world around him. • trying to organize the information he is receiving from his senses.
<p>2</p> <p><i>Stage Two:</i> Falling in Love</p>	Approximately 2 to 10 months	<p>Your baby is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • becoming more focused on parents and other persons and things outside herself. • expressing emotional reactions of her own (e.g., smiles and frowns). • expressing pleasure in others' company.
<p>3</p> <p><i>Stage Three:</i> Becoming a Two-Way Communicator</p>	Approximately 3 to 10 months	<p>Your baby is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • purposefully using gestures (facial expressions, actions, and sounds) to communicate. • responding to others' gestures with gestures of his own. • realizing that he can use sounds and gestures to get his needs met by loved caregivers.
<p>4</p> <p><i>Stage Four:</i> Learning to Solve Problems and Discovering a Sense of Self</p>	Approximately 9 to 18 months	<p>Your baby is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning to solve problems, like how to stack blocks in a tower. • communicating in increasingly complex ways, using language, expressions, and gestures. • learning what to expect from others, based on interactions and experiences with parents and caregivers. • developing a sense of self.
<p>5</p> <p><i>Stage Five:</i> Creating Ideas</p>	Approximately 16 to 36 months	<p>Your toddler is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • becoming skilled in symbolic thought (e.g., labeling images with words: "Cookie!"). • using verbal means to communicate needs and desires. • engaging in pretend play. • learning to recognize and communicate her feelings. • learning to understand others' feelings.

(Greenspan 1999)

Good Habits to Get Into

From birth to age 2, parents and caregivers have a big part to play in helping children learn about feelings. The most important thing they can do is meet their babies' needs, love and nurture them, and comfort them when they are upset. This type of responsive care helps very young children build a strong, loving relationship with the adults who care for them. Feeling safe and secure, loved and nurtured, is the biggest and most important ingredient for a child's healthy social-emotional development.

There are other things that you can do to help your baby or young toddler begin to learn about feelings and how to express them. These are all good habits to develop while your child is young so that they become part of your everyday interactions and routines.

- **Think about your child's temperament**, or the way in which she approaches and reacts to the world. Temperament influences how intensely your child experiences feelings (like frustration or anger) and how easily she can calm down. A child who has strong feelings and reactions might have a harder time learning to control her emotions. Strong feelings probably feel even bigger and more overwhelming to her. On the other hand, a child who is easy going and allows changes or disruptions to "roll off her back" will probably have an easier time. Think about your own temperament. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to be. *But paying attention to your own and your child's temperament gives you important information about each of your preferences.* You can learn how to adjust or match your caregiving to meet your child's needs and help her grow and learn.
- **Talk about feelings.** At first, babies and young toddlers will probably not understand when you say, "I can see you are angry because Jessie knocked your blocks over" or "You are so sad that your balloon flew away." It might even feel a little silly to talk to a tiny baby about his feelings. But this is an important part of helping your child learn to identify and describe his emotions. When you use feeling words over and over as your child grows, he will eventually come to understand what you mean. As your child's language skills develop, he will start to use these words on his own.
- **Be a role model for expressing strong feelings in healthy ways:** "I just spilled your cup of juice all over the floor! I am feeling really frustrated. I think I am just going to close my eyes and count to five before I clean up." Through your words and actions, you can show your child how to manage strong feelings and recover. And when you are having a hard time, it's okay to make sure your children are in a safe place and give yourself a couple of minutes to calm down. You are modeling self-control and showing that sometimes you need a break, too.

Practice Makes Perfect

Children from birth to age 2 are learning a lot about relationships, feelings, soothing, and self-control. Here are some activities and strategies you can use with your child to help him or her begin to understand these big ideas:

From Birth to 18 Months

- **Keep your baby close.** Put on some of your favorite music, pick up your baby, and gently sway to the beat. Gaze into your baby's eyes, smile at her, and hold her next to your body. Leave the infant carrier in the car sometimes and hold your baby instead as you walk through the mall or visit a friend. Cuddle and nuzzle your baby during some one-on-one time before bed. Shared moments like these help build a strong bond between the two of you.
- **Read or tell stories about feelings.** Choose books with brightly colored illustrations or pictures and not too much text. Stories help your baby begin to understand emotions like frustration, anger, pride, and joy. As you read, point to the faces in the book and say, "She looks excited. He looks surprised." As your child grows, you can ask: "Who is sad on this page?" When he is able to talk, you can ask, "How is that baby feeling?"
- **Make baby-safe puppets.** Cut some pictures of babies and adults from magazines or catalogs. Choose pictures that show a range of emotions. You can also use family photos. Glue these to sturdy cardboard. If you'd like, you can cover them in clear contact paper so your baby can drool on them! Let your baby choose a face to look at. Let her look at the picture for as long as she'd like. Talk about the picture as your baby gazes at it: "That baby is crying. He is sad." Or, "That baby is laughing. He is happy to play with his puppy."
- **Play peek-a-boo.** Beginning at about 6 to 9 months, babies really enjoy peek-a-boo. Label your baby's feelings as you play: "Uh oh, where's Mommy? Here I am—Peek-a-boo! Are you surprised? Are you happy to find Mommy?" Games like peek-a-boo are also ways you can practice separations, reassuring your child that "I might go away, but I come back."



- **Look in the mirror.** Babies don't really know it's them in the mirror until they are about 2 years old. But you can help them become familiar with their own faces by making baby-safe mirrors part of your play. As the two of you look at your reflections, point to your smile and say, "I am so happy. I am happy because I love being here with you!"
- **Watch to see how your child responds to sounds and textures.** Use different sounds (rattles, toy pianos, shakers) and textures (towel, blanket, a square of lace, a piece of sandpaper, etc.) during playtime with your baby. Watch how your child responds. What does he like? Dislike? How much stimulation is too much for him? How do you know when your baby has had enough playtime (does he cry, look away, fall asleep, etc.)? Information like this helps you understand his needs and make him feel safe and comfortable.
- **Help your child recover when feelings get overwhelming.** How does your child like to be soothed? You can try swaddling, or snugly wrapping your baby in a blanket. Giving your baby a pacifier to suck, rocking, and singing can also help soothe the little ones. For children over age 1, a cuddly stuffed animal or special blanket can comfort and calm them. Does your toddler need time alone to calm down? A firm hug or cuddle time, a change of scenery, a chance to jump up and down, or some physical play can also help toddlers recover. When you help soothe your young child, you are not "spoiling." Instead, you are teaching your child that she can depend on you. Children are also learning what to do to make themselves feel better when they get overwhelmed—a lifelong skill.
- **Know that your baby senses how you are feeling.** Research has shown that babies watch their loved ones very closely and respond to the feelings of the people around them. They know when you are upset, angry, stressed, or worried, even when you are trying very hard to hide it. They can feel your arms holding them differently when you are stressed and they are able to recognize that although you are smiling, your eyes are sad. So it's very important to take care of yourself so that you can take good care of your baby and help him feel safe, secure, and loved.



From 18 Months to 2 Years

- **Use pretend play as a chance to talk about feelings.** Your young toddler is just beginning to play pretend. You can help her develop this important skill by using a doll or stuffed animal in your play. Ask your child, "Doggie is sad because he fell down and got a bump. What can we do to make Doggie feel better?" This helps your child think about others' feelings, a quality called "empathy."
- **Make a homemade book about feelings.** Toddlers love looking at photos of you, themselves, and their friends. Snap some photos of your child when he is happy, silly, tired, excited, etc. Glue each photo to a piece of sturdy paper or cardboard. Write a feeling word under the photo, punch holes in the pages, and tie together with yarn. Let your child "read" the book to you and tell you how he is feeling in each photo.
- **Use songs to practice feeling words.** Your child's language is just beginning to take off, so give her a fun way to practice by changing the words to songs like "When You're Happy and You Know It." Try adding new verses like, "When you're angry and you know it, stomp your feet," "When you're sad and you know it, get a hug," "When you're cranky and you know it, find your Teddy," etc.
- **Make a cozy place in your home.** Just like adults, children sometimes need time alone to calm down. Give your child a space to do this by piling up some soft cushions and blankets, and adding a few stuffed animals and favorite stories. You can even get a large moving box, cut a door, and create a toddler-size "cozy room." Encourage your child to use this place when he is feeling overwhelmed or just wants some quiet time.
- **Suggest ways to manage strong emotions.** We often tell toddlers what not to do (e.g., "No screaming" or "Stop hitting"). Telling toddlers what they can do to express big feelings is even more important. When your child is really angry, suggest that she jump up and down, hit the sofa cushions, rip paper, cuddle up in a cozy area for alone time, paint an angry picture, or some other strategy that you feel is appropriate. The goal is to teach your child that any emotion is okay to feel and that she can learn to express feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways.
- **Empathize with your child's feelings.** Sometimes the choices your child is being offered are not the ones he wants. Because your reaction gives him a cue of how to respond, it's best to stay matter-of-fact when you explain: "I know that

Taking Care of Yourself

We all feel stressed and overwhelmed at times. Thinking about what makes you feel calmer and more relaxed gives you an idea of what you can do when the going gets rough. You might try asking a trusted adult to watch your child for a little while so you have some time to yourself; exercising; writing in a journal; talking to a friend, counselor, or home visitor; or connecting with other parents. When you are a parent, it can be easy to forget that you need to be nurtured, too. But you do! Parenting can be hard work at times and all parents need and deserve support.

Pow! Bam! Take That! And That!

As you watch your child playact a battle between two action figures, your impulse might be to stop this aggressive play. But this is very typical for the toddler years.

Play is the perfect time for children to work out strong feelings, even difficult ones like anger, frustration, or fear. Watching children as they play, and playing with them, helps you understand what they are thinking about or struggling with. You can also get insight into where they need a little support and how you can help them make sense of the world around them. If an upsetting play theme continues for a while or you are worried about your child's play, talk with your child's health care provider, teacher or caregiver, or a child development specialist.

• Plan for tantrums.

Tantrums are very common in the toddler years because children are still learning—and sometimes really struggling—with managing and expressing their feelings.

Tantrums are their way of saying, “I am out of control and need your help to calm down.”

Rather than getting angry, too (which is easy to do, but can be scary for your child), help your child recover. Here's what you can try:

1. Put into words how you think your child is feeling: “You are really mad. You are so frustrated!”
 2. Give him a way to show his strong feelings: “Do you want to throw some pillows?”
 3. Give him the support he needs (hugs, time alone, his teddy, etc.) to recover.
 4. Suggest another activity to shift his energy to something positive: “Let's play with blocks.”
 5. And, as hard as it is sometimes, try to stay calm during your child's tantrums. You teach your child self-control by staying calm when he has “lost it.” This helps him feel safe and lets him know that you'll always be there to support him—even during the tough times.
- **Offer choices.** Choices give toddlers a sense of control and can help them cope with disappointment. You might say, “It is bedtime. But you can choose whether you put pajamas on first or whether you brush teeth first.” Choices can also help children deal with angry feelings and move on. For example, during a tantrum, you might say, “I can see you need to cry right now. Would you like me to hold you or do you want to be alone?”

you do not want the doctor to give you a shot. You are feeling really worried. But the shot keeps you healthy. It will hurt a little, but not too much. And it will be over with very quickly.” This helps your child cope and, hopefully, move on.

- **Help your child understand her feelings and behavior.** When you can make connections between your child's temperament and her feelings, it helps her learn about herself. For example, you might say to a child who has a hard time moving between activities, “It's hard for you to get ready for nap right after we finish lunch. Your body needs time to relax after playing and eating. I will help you settle down and start to feel sleepy. Let's choose a story and get cozy.” Over time this helps your child learn to manage situations that are challenging for her.

Teaching Feeling Words



We often think only of teaching words for common emotions like happy, sad, mad, etc. But there are many, many other feeling words that we can use to describe the range of complex emotions each of us (and our children) experience every day. Children benefit when they develop a “feelings vocabulary” that they can use to communicate what they are feeling and experiencing. While babies and

toddlers won't understand these words right away, over time and with practice they will grasp their meaning and begin to use these words themselves. Here are some ideas:

Brave	Frustrated	Embarrassed	Safe
Cheerful	Curious	Jealous	Relieved
Worried	Friendly	Angry	Peaceful
Joyful	Shy	Bored	Overwhelmed
Frightened	Ignored	Surprised	Loving
Calm	Lonely	Silly	Cranky
Excited	Interested	Uncomfortable	
Confused	Proud	Stubborn	

Putting It All Together

Understanding feelings is an important part of a child's social-emotional development. Babies and toddlers experience feelings just like you do, and know when you are feeling happy or down as well. When you use words to describe emotions, share in their good feelings, and comfort them when they feel sad or overwhelmed, young children are learning important social-emotional skills. This learning takes a lot of practice on their part, and a lot of patience on yours. But the time and effort are worth it. The social-emotional skills children develop in the first two years are ones they will use and build on for the rest of their lives.

Reference: Greenspan, S. (with Breslau Lewis, N.). (1999). *Building healthy minds: The six experiences that create intelligence and emotional growth in babies and young children.* Cambridge: Perseus Books.



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Child Care Bureau



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