



Your growing infant: Feelings are an early language

Infants are happier and healthier when they feel safe and connected. The way you and others relate to your infant affects the many new connections that are forming in the baby's brain. These early brain connections are the basis for learning, behavior and health. Early, caring relationships prepare your baby's brain for the future.

Reading your signals

By the time babies are 9 months old, they often have a healthy fear of strangers. This is "stranger anxiety." When a stranger comes close, your baby will look to you for clues. "Is this new face a friend or an enemy?" If you seem comfortable with the stranger, your child will often relax as well. If you look uncertain, your child will make it very clear that this new person is not welcome!

"Social referencing" is your baby's ability to read your face when sizing up a stranger. It shows that your baby is aware of your feelings. If you smile at your baby and use soothing words, you are giving him clear signals that everything is fine. This helps to soothe and calm him.

But if you are not aware of your baby's fear, or are not able to smile or to use soothing words, your baby may become more fearful and upset.

Your feelings affect your child

Feelings are a language that your infant understands early in life. Don't try to hide your feelings. This might confuse your baby. Instead, try to soften strong emotions.

Think about how your emotions affect your child. For example, are you:

- yelling in frustration with another child or partner
- withdrawing or crying all the time
- becoming angry or violent?

Or, are you showing healthy ways of dealing with strong emotions? Try to:

- choose your words carefully
- calm yourself by walking away
- agree to talk about a conflict later
- talk when the child cannot hear you.

Infants and children believe that the world revolves around them. If you are angry at someone, like your boss or your spouse, your baby may sense this. But he may think you are angry at him instead! Be aware of what you and your face are "saying" every day.

