

Babies Learn from Reading Faces

During a baby's first year of life, he will learn how to handle new situations by reading his parent's face. Researchers call this skill social referencing.



Babies are constantly involved in new situations. They often come in contact with objects and people who are not familiar.

In a new situation, a young baby (6 to 9 months) looks to his parents to make sure they are nearby. He is not too concerned about his parent's facial reaction. He just wants mom or dad close. However, at 10 to 13 months, babies begin to use their parent's facial expressions to make decisions about new situations and objects.

At about 1 year, babies can interpret the emotions they see on a parent's face. They know that certain facial expressions and tones of voice mean something. It may mean, *"Stop, don't do that,"* or *"It's OK, go ahead and play."* They will respond to certain situations depending upon their parents' emotional reaction.

Your face tells your child how you feel — what is safe and what is dangerous. You can help your baby learn the important skill of reading faces and emotions.

- Have fun face-to-face time with your baby. Let her see your facial expressions. Notice how she smiles when you smile and frowns when you frown.
- Provide clear examples of your emotions. If your child approaches something dangerous, say "no" and give a stern look. If it is OK for your baby to play with something new, say "OK" and give her a happy look. You can also nod your head for yes and shake your head back and forth for no.
- Use positive emotions as you introduce your baby to new objects, food and people.

This simple concept helps prepare your baby for a life of learning. You are your baby's first teacher. Your baby learns by watching you. Use daily situations to help your baby learn boundaries that keep him safe.

*Brought to you by Parent Help Line at HSHS St. John's Children's Hospital
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