

Your child's social and emotional development from birth to 3 years

As soon as your baby is born, you can start teaching them to trust, love and connect with others by building a close bond with them.

Even before they learn and understand language, children feel emotions. They can tell if you are happy and relaxed, or tense and upset. They are aware of the people and emotions expressed around them and the environment they live in. Children have the same feelings as adults. They may not know the words angry, sad, happy or scared, but they will experience these feelings.

Value children

It's very important for a child to feel confident that there is someone in their life who loves them no matter what. Show your child that you love them all the time, even when you are angry with them. Let your child know you love them by smiling, touching, talking, listening, watching and being empathetic with their feelings.

Express feelings

Teach your child to name their feelings. By giving a name to feelings and talking about your child's emotions, you can help your child understand feelings like happy, sad, excited and angry. Children who can express their feelings and know they will get a soothing response are less likely to act out to make their needs known. They will learn to tell you what they are feeling and why.

Children learn how to understand their feelings and what to do about them by watching you. Talk to your child about how you are feeling and why. By doing this you help your child understand that feelings (even "bad" feelings) are normal and that there are healthy ways to respond to them. For example, "I'm feeling upset because grandma had to cancel her visit. I'm going to take some deep breaths to calm down, but it's okay for me to feel sad and cry for a little while."

Your baby's social and emotional development (birth to 6 months)

You can support your baby by:

- Cuddling and comforting them when they cry or are upset
- Smiling back when they smile and making lots of eye contact
- Holding them, touching them and cuddling them skin-to-skin
- Reading and singing to them
- Practice other "serve and return" interactions (visit [HealthLinkBC File #92b Your child's development from birth to 3 years](#))

During the toddler years, your child will grow in these two important areas of development:

- **Social** – how they interact with others
- **Emotional** – how they recognize, express and manage their feelings

Your toddler's social development (6 months to 3 years)

You can support your toddler at every stage by:

- Responding to their behaviour in warm and consistent ways
- Keeping to routines and talking to them about what activities will happen next in the day
- Eating together at the family table
- Using “please” and “thank you” to model good manners
- Letting them be around people and playing with other children
- Playing games with them
- Helping them learn to cooperate, trust and be confident with others
- Giving them ideas on how to interact with other toddlers
- Pointing out what other children are doing or what others may be thinking or feeling

Your toddler's emotional development (6 months to 3 years)

You can support your toddler at every stage by:

- Holding, cuddling and comforting them, especially when they're upset, sick, scared or hurt
- Helping them learn to recognize and name their emotions
- Helping them learn to show their feelings in a healthy way
- Letting them know it's okay to have feelings, even big ones. Comforting them and staying present until big feelings have passed
- Talking to them about how others feel and how their actions affect them (“I

think John feels sad because you took away their toy”)

- Singing songs and reading stories about emotions
- Creating lots of structure and routines and talking about any upcoming changes to their routine
- Offering them choices (“Do you want the red cup or the blue cup?”)
- Making transitions easier by letting them know what to expect (“In 5 minutes, we are going to get ready for bed”)
- Offer encouragement and empathy when they're struggling with something new (“I can see you're trying hard to zip up your jacket. It can be tricky, but if you keep trying I know you'll get it. If you need a break, though, I can help this time”)
- Practicing “serve and return” interactions (visit [HealthLinkBC File #92b Your child's development from birth to 3 years](#))

It's okay for your toddler to feel frustration. Letting them feel frustrated while they work on simple tasks is part of how they learn to solve problems.

Encouraging your toddler's independence

Between 12 and 36 months, your toddler will learn that they can control themselves, their body, and sometimes, those around them. This is a healthy and important step in their development. You can help your toddler to become more independent by:

- Letting them do what they can on their own, from getting dressed to washing their body
- Letting them make simple choices, like what shoes to wear

- Encouraging them to do things by themselves, even if they need extra time
- Encouraging new activities that they'll likely do well
- Giving them time to repeat a skill as they're learning, like letting them master stacking 2 blocks before giving them a third
- Be positive about their efforts, even if they're not successful

Encouraging your toddler's empathy development

Empathy is a complex part of development that can be a struggle for a child to grasp. But learning to feel and show empathy is an important part of your toddler's growth into a responsible and caring person. Your toddler can start to learn empathy by watching you. Try:

- Responding to their needs and the needs of others in a caring and fair way
- Helping them name their feelings and understand why these feelings are happening, and talking about what to do about them (for example, asking for a hug when they feel sad)
- Helping them understand how their actions can affect people in positive and negative ways
- Showing them how to share and be kind
- Showing them how to apologize when it's appropriate

For more information

For more information about child health and development, visit:

- [Baby's Best Chance: Parents' Handbook of Pregnancy and Baby Care](#)
- [Toddler's First Steps: A Best Chance Guide to Parenting Your 6-to-36 Month-Old Child](#)
- [Feelings First](#) – Learning about social and emotional development in the early years
- [HealthLinkBC File #92a Your child and play from birth to 3 years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92b Your child's development from birth to 3 years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92d Toilet learning](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92e Time for bed](#)

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