

Tuning in to our babies

The importance of the relationship between parents and their babies and toddlers



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About this booklet

This booklet explores how we feel about our babies and toddlers – and how they feel about us! It's about feelings and emotions; all very important in how they affect the way we think and behave. And yet for much of the time we don't pay too much attention to them – and we don't talk about them with our children.

Children can show us what they feel by what they do – but they need words, too, to describe what they are experiencing. This is a much harder task for them to do than learning to name things or events. This booklet aims to highlight the wide-ranging effects of our feelings and emotions and how the way we respond to the needs and signals of our children can have a positive effect on their mental health.

Introducing mental health

Putting it simply, our mental health is the strength and well being of our minds. As new parents, we receive a great deal of information and support about how to meet the physical needs of our children from the moment they are born. We have much less guidance, however, to help us understand their mental health needs and our own feelings in becoming parents. The mental health of our children and ourselves is as important as physical health. It provides the basis for good relationships and the capacity to enjoy life and make the most of our abilities and opportunities in the future.

Babies and toddlers are individuals

We sometimes ask ourselves why it is that some babies and young children are restless, cry a lot and seem ill at ease – whilst others are more content, relaxed and able to “fit in” with everyday life. This is not easy to understand. The answer usually lies in the way our baby, with his or her own biological make-up and personality, fits into our family life, with all of our own ways of going about things, our hopes and expectations.

Part of the challenge of becoming a parent is learning to live with a baby’s individual personality and to recognise his or her own particular needs. If we are lucky and our child is born with an easy-going nature, he or she is likely to respond well to being loved, fed and cared for – and to be more ready to fit in with a routine that suits everybody.



Differing emotional responses

But some babies are simply not able to respond in this way. They may be born more fretful, sensitive or touchy than others. Some may have had a difficult birth that has been very upsetting to both mother and baby, physically and emotionally.

A baby who is tense and anxious may become very restless and uncomfortable – developing a range of physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach aches, vomiting and sleeplessness. A baby who has a chronic physical illness may become particularly distressed and frightened.

In order to be able to provide a child with the kind of love and care he or she needs, parents themselves also need to feel looked after. Mothers, in particular, need a lot of support in the weeks after birth – especially from their partners, friends and family. We may all feel very proud and delighted by our new baby – but at the same time, especially in the early weeks, we may feel very tired and confused. Some parents experience unexpected feelings of depression and partners may well feel excluded.

Making the transition from being a couple to becoming two parents is a major challenge. For parents bringing up their babies on their own, without a partner, it is essential that they find people around them who can give not only practical but emotional support.

So why do babies and toddlers respond in the way they do?

The way that our children are cared for in the early years of life has a major impact on how they will respond to difficulties and relationships later in life. Babies are totally dependent on our ability to be responsive to their needs. If they learn to feel and enjoy their parents' love, care, comfort and protection, they will start to feel secure and understood. They will experience the world as a safe place – and relate to it positively, with curiosity and enthusiasm.

All of this requires us to have “empathy” – to be able to appreciate the world from our baby's point of view. This lays the basis for our children to understand themselves and respect others as they grow up. The security of their relationships with us, their parents, remains the crucial launching pad for future relationships. If they do not feel well cared for, emotionally as well as physically, they grow up with a greater degree of mistrust and fear, making it hard for them to respond to the emotional needs of other people.



The emotional roller coaster of parenting

We all experience problems from time to time, which make us feel low and sometimes out of control. What is important is the extent to which we are able to deal with these problems without feeling too overwhelmed and stressed. Becoming a new parent can make many problems seem bigger than they are. Some new mothers can suffer from post-natal depression, which needs active treatment. If they or their friends or family think they are experiencing serious depression, the health visitor or GP can help.

For many of us, parenthood, however joyful and rewarding it may be, brings with it worries that we have not experienced before:

- feeling responsible for another human being
- trying to be a “good parent” and providing a suitable home
- wondering what is “normal” development for a child
- struggling to manage competing demands on our time - from employers, partners and other relationships, as well as the baby

If we, as parents, are worried or depressed, the chances are that our baby will pick up our distress. Babies are extremely sensitive to the emotions surrounding them and to our anxieties.

So what do we mean by a child's emotional surroundings?

Being in warm, loving surroundings, with plenty of physical contact, is the single most important factor for improving our baby's physical and emotional well being. Babies and toddlers are more likely to feel safe when the same familiar people are looking after them each day. They learn to feel safe and well cared for. Cuddling, smiling, chatting, singing – all of these kinds of activities matter in building up our growing child's sense of enjoyment and security. Routines too, are very important.

Routines, for example, around mealtimes and bedtimes can be very useful in helping our babies and toddlers to adapt both physically and emotionally to a daily pattern, which suits both them and ourselves. This is especially helpful during times of change in their lives, such as starting nursery or moving house. If some parts of the day remain familiar, they can cope better with new experiences.

But sometimes babies don't want to, or can't, fit in with the pattern that we want to set. If this is the case it might be worth thinking again carefully about what the baby needs, and organising the day in a slightly different way. Health visitors are a very useful source of advice and help, particularly on problems to do with feeding or sleeping.



Feeding or fighting – why is food a common emotional battleground?

Feeding is one of the closest and most vital aspects of a relationship between a baby and his or her parents. It can be a very pleasurable time for all concerned. However it can also present problems, probably because it is such an intimate experience. It is one of the few areas in a baby's life in which he or she can exert some control over what goes on from a very early age. Feeding can easily become a battleground, with many of us becoming extremely anxious and frustrated, leading to many difficulties.

These difficulties can arise for a number of reasons:

Personality: Some babies and toddlers are very restless, easily distracted or overwhelmed by too many things happening at once, which makes it hard for them to settle down to feed.

Emotional difficulties: Babies and toddlers can be very sensitive to our moods. If we are tense or upset, this can communicate itself to our babies and they may in turn start to feel tense too. As children become older, their own reactions to upsets can affect their appetites.

Food quantity: Too little food can leave a child hungry and miserable and too much food can lead to a child refusing to finish a meal, vomiting or becoming overweight. Children need to be offered a balanced diet. If they are generally healthy and happy, it is better to be guided by them and not make them eat things they don't want to.

Food type: Sometimes babies are introduced to solid foods too early or they may well be sensitive to certain kinds of foods. Many become “fussy eaters”. It may help to try different tastes and different textures gradually. As our children get older, there is a balance to strike between respecting their right to dislike certain foods, but not allowing them to become too choosy.

Health visitors and GPs can advise us about our baby’s diet if we get into difficulty.

When things go wrong....

When things go wrong, it is always worth asking why. It is important to try and see the situation from the child’s point of view. When we are feeling under pressure or unhappy, it is all too easy to blame our child. We may call him or her “naughty” for not eating; “difficult” for refusing to go to bed at night; “awkward” for crying before nursery every morning. Often there are good reasons why they behave in this way - reflecting difficulties in their relationship with us as parents. It is quite normal, for example, for a young child to feel anxious and upset about starting nursery school or primary school. Leaving familiar people and routines is worrying and they may need a lot of reassurance.

Young children, like adults, need to feel good about themselves. If they feel good, they are more ready to try out new things. On the other hand if they feel they are always “getting things



wrong”, they start to lose confidence. It is worth thinking about how we ourselves feel when we are criticised. Of course, children need to be corrected by their parents and carers, but too much criticism can lead them to feel very unsure of themselves – and can cause, in the long run, deep resentments.

We can help our children by making it clear, in language they can understand, what we believe is acceptable behaviour – and backing this with praise for their behaving and trying to behave well.

What kinds of events can disturb the emotional health of babies and toddlers?

There are many things which can upset young children, but some of the most common are:

- being overly worried by our own difficulties
- not agreeing on how to bring up our children and/or not sticking to what we have agreed
- our children having communication or learning problems
- the arrival of a new baby in the family
- moving house

- families breaking up – especially when there is tension and bad feeling between parents, or when the child feels rejected by one of us who has left
- divorce or separation, when one of us may move a long way away, or doesn't keep in touch
- illness, death or moving away of close friends or relatives
- our re-marriage and the introduction of step brothers and sisters
- problems in the nursery school or playgroup
- long-term health problems in our children or ourselves

How young children cope with any of these situations is likely to depend on the level of understanding and support that we and other carers are able to offer. If the adults around them are able to recognise their distress and listen and talk to them about what is going on, most will cope well enough. Their difficulties may cause them a lot of distress, but they can also lead to new understanding and the development of new strengths. Some young children, however, may not be able to manage so well and may feel increasingly insecure, frightened and angry. They may start to:

- not want to leave our side
- have more tantrums than usual
- become withdrawn, which we may mistake for “being good”
- become aggressive to other children
- be “naughty” when they know that they will get into trouble
- forget skills they have learned



Some ways of dealing with problems

- Talk over the problem with all those who share in looking after our child and try to make sense of his or her difficulties from everybody's point of view. It is important to take a look at what we are doing – children often copy the behaviour they see in us. Sometimes, if we change our behaviour and ways of doing things, this can have a remarkable effect on the child's behaviour or in the way in which he or she views or understands the problem.
- Encourage positive behaviour. Catch them being good whenever possible and praise their behaviour, for example, "I am really pleased with you for picking up your toys", tells the child exactly what we're pleased with, rather than the more general "I am really pleased you're being good", which does not.
- Talk about the problem with the child and listen, without making judgements, to her or his view. Children need to be able to express their feelings, even as toddlers, and need our help to put them into words.
- Discourage unacceptable behaviour. Set clear boundaries and make it clear what is acceptable and what is not. Try to understand the child's behaviour and what lies behind it. It may be that disruptive or naughty behaviour is the only way our child can communicate that something is wrong – for example, feeling unsafe or frightened.
- Try to reduce the stress around the problem. For example, if there is an issue around toilet training – is it possible that we have started this too early? If the child is not finishing their meal, you could start with smaller portions.

How can we help a young child cope with changes?

Planning ahead. If we know our young child is facing a major change in his or her life, it is usually helpful to start talking about what is going to happen beforehand, so that he or she can get used to the idea. This applies to changes that are positive as well as negative for our child. Some parents find stories useful as a way of introducing something new, such as the arrival of a new brother or sister, or starting nursery school.

Thinking ahead. This involves us helping our child to think in more detail about what the change will involve and who will be there to support them, if they are finding it difficult. It is important to keep to familiar routines as much as possible to help children, and indeed ourselves, to cope with change.

Recognition and understanding. Young children react to changes in their lives in different ways. Some may show how they feel in the way they behave; others may bury their feelings and only show a reaction at a later stage. Others may show difficulties in one area of their life (for example, in the nursery school), whilst desperately trying to be “good” at home. It is important to be alert to these reactions – to keep in touch with your child’s feelings in different situations.



Noticing and reassuring. Most young children will cope well enough with the changes that life brings if we notice what they do and what they communicate to us, and reassure them that they will be loved and supported through the changes.

Playing with children. It is important to let children take the lead in how they want to play, rather than having us show them. Play is fun and it is serious for children. It can be very useful in easing tension and give children the opportunity to work through what's on their mind.

Sharing experiences. Finally, talking to other parents and carers about their experiences can help us feel that we are not the only ones whose babies and toddlers sometimes find it hard to get along with us.

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YoungMinds

102-108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA

Tel: 020 7336 8445

Fax: 020 7336 8446

Email: enquiries@youngminds.org.uk

Website: www.youngminds.org.uk

Parents' Information Service: 0800 018 2138

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