

Social-Emotional Development:

Birth to 12 Months



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Starting from birth, babies are learning who they are by how they are treated. Through everyday interactions, parents, relatives, and caregivers send babies messages like: You're clever. You're good at figuring things out. You're loved. You make me laugh. I enjoy being with you. These messages shape a baby's sense of self.

A 10-month-old laughs as his mother holds a napkin over his face, and then drops it to say, "Peek-a-boo!" Whenever his mother tries to put the napkin back on the table, the baby says, "eh, eh, eh" and kicks his arms and legs to let her know that he wants her to play the game again. She follows his lead and keeps playing until he gets bored. This baby is discovering that relationships with others are satisfying and pleasurable, that he is a good communicator, and that his needs and desires are important.

What Can You Do?

Provide babies with responsive care. Responsive care means matching your care to what your baby needs. For example, your 8-month-old might start kicking, babbling, and grabbing at mealtime to show you he really wants to hold his own spoon. You know that he's not yet able to feed himself, so you give him a baby spoon to hold in his hands while you continue feeding him with another. This is responsive care because you took the time to think about what your baby's behavior meant and figured out a way to support him. You can:

- **Notice your baby's individual cues.** How does your baby communicate with you? What are her likes and dislikes? How do you know she's tired or hungry? What activities does she enjoy?
- **Describe her feelings (and yours too).** Use feelings words (happy, sad, upset, surprised, etc.) to describe your baby's experiences--and your own. While he won't understand you right away, by the time they're toddlers, they'll be able to use these words to share how they're feeling.



Support babies' developing skills. Babies learn best when you let them play, explore, and follow their interests. They develop new skills when you give them just enough help so that they can master a challenge without becoming overly frustrated. For example, if you see a five-month-old trying to roll over, you may hold a toy to his side so that he reaches over to grab it. You can:

- **Delight in your baby's discoveries.** You shook the rattle and it made a sound!
- **Keep playtime phone-free.** Babies delight in playing with you. A big part of the fun is the eye contact and chatting (or babbling!) that the two of you share. Keeping phones off while you play helps make sure these important connections happen.



Be affectionate and nurturing. You can't spoil a baby. Touching, holding, rocking, singing and talking to your baby all send the message that he is special and loved. You can:

- **Give hugs and kisses.** Let your baby know how loved she is.
- **Be patient during the tough times.** Colic, crying and fussiness are part of babyhood. When you can support babies at their most difficult, you are letting them know they can trust and rely on you. This makes them feel safe and helps them learn to soothe themselves.



Help your child feel safe and secure. You help your baby feel safe and secure when you respond to her cries and other communications—like picking your baby up when she lifts her arms in the air to say, “Up!” Babies also feel secure when they get lots of affection from you and when their daily schedules are predictable. When your baby knows she can trust you to meet her needs, she develops a sense of safety and confidence. You can:

- **Be a safe “home base” for your baby.** Watch how your child crawls away, then comes back to check in with you. He wants to be sure you are still there and may be looking for encouragement to explore some more..
- **Establish routines for your baby.** Knowing what to expect helps babies feel safe, confident, and in control of their world. Try to keep daily routines in the same order and at the same time each day. For example, there may be a morning walk, then diaper change, then milk, then stories.



Look for ways to make your home culture part of your child’s everyday routines. A child’s culture is an important part of who he is. The connection he has to his culture shapes his identity and self-esteem in healthy and positive ways. You can:

- **Teach your child’s caregivers** the words your family uses for important people (mother, father, grandparents) and things (such as bottle, blanket, pacifier).
- **Choose books and music that reflect your home culture.** These are often available at your public library for no charge and will quickly become a beloved part of your child’s daily routines.



P-5 1 Domain #1. Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development is part of the ZERO TO THREE Competencies for P-5 Professionals™ which serve as the framework for all of ZERO TO THREE’s professional development offerings. They include eight core competency domains essential for professionals working with expectant parents, children from birth to 5 years old, and their families.

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