

# Parent Connections

FIRST CONNECTIONS – EARLY INTERVENTION IN ARKANSAS

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## Promoting Social-Emotional Development - Part 1

**When parents have support networks, they're also showing their child that he/she is part of a larger network of love and relationships . . .**

You try to be SuperMom or SuperDad and do it all yourself. Maybe you're so dedicated to being the best parent that you can be that you "never" take time off of parenting to do something with friends or to have a date night with your partner. But when parents have a support network of other trusted adult caregivers, babies learn that they are part of a larger network of relationships and both baby and parents benefit!

*Here's an example:*

It's been a rough day. The washing machine broke and flooded the floor. Kamika has a week's worth of dirty laundry piled up with no way to get it done. She's frustrated about the washer, but worse, she's got a paper due for tomorrow's class. She's exhausted because she's operating on just 3 hours of sleep because her 3-month old, Dinah, has been colicky and had a hard time getting to and staying asleep last night.

"I feel like I'm gonna snap—I just can't do this," she says on the phone to her friend Chelle. "I've been there," says Chelle, "I want you to rest when you put Dinah down for her nap. I'll come over later this afternoon and watch the baby while you work on your paper." Chelle may think she's just helping a friend through a bad day – and she is! But she's actually helping Dinah, too, because Dinah learns from interacting with other caring adults.

Caring for children can be incredibly joyful and rewarding but also very stressful. We all feel like we are at our wit's end now and then. It's important for parents to have other people and places they can count on for support, whether physical, emotional, or financial. When parents have support and encouragement, they are better able to be a responsive and nurturing parent to their little one.

## Playing = Learning

There's a lot happening during playtime. Little ones are lifting, dropping, looking, pouring, bouncing, hiding, building, knocking down, and more.

**Babies are busy when they're playing . . . they're learning.**

They are learning key scientific concepts, such as what sinks and floats; mathematical concepts, including how to balance blocks to build a tower; and literacy skills, such as trying out new vocabulary or storytelling skills as children "act out" different roles. Play is the true work of childhood. And when your children play with you, they are also learning—that they are loved and important and that they are fun to be around. These social-emotional skills give them the self-esteem and self-confidence they need to continue building loving and supportive relationships all their lives.

**Parent's Perspective: Tips from one parent to others to prepare for the Developmental Evaluation:**

*Barbara Popper for ZerotoThree.org*

1. **Be the parent.** You know your child better than anyone else. Your gut feelings and observations count. Be the parent and make use of other team members' expertise as it applies.
2. **Schedule at family's convenience.** Plan to complete the assessment at a time when your child is well-rested, fed, and generally "happy."
3. **You don't need to learn all the technical terms.** These can be defined for you. Explaining what's going on with your child in your terms is fine and will be understood by everyone.
4. **Don't be afraid to disagree.** If professionals see your child differently than you do, ask for more discussion. Accepting an assessment that you feel does not accurately portray your child will be of no use to you.
5. **Understand that your level of involvement may vary.** You have the right to be involved in your child's evaluation and the right to choose the location of the assessment (children generally perform better in a familiar environment). Your decision to be more or less involved should be accepted by your early intervention team. How involved you will be in each stage of the process may depend on your child's needs.
6. **Make sure your concerns about your child and your goals for your child are understood and recorded.** Spending time on a process that doesn't address what you are concerned about will delay your ability to help your child.
7. **Find support for yourself.** Take care of yourself and your family. Early intervention isn't just for babies – if you need help in building a support network, ask your EI team.
8. **Share your knowledge with others.** Parents who are in the process of trying to learn what you have already discovered need your help. Share what you have learned with those who need it most by joining a parent group.

## Preparing for Your Child's Developmental Evaluation/Assessment

**Developmental evaluation** is a process designed to deepen understanding of a child's strengths, skills, interests, resources, and needs. The **Child and Family Assessment** is like an interview that you complete with your early interventionist to give your EI team some insight into your goals for your child, how and where your family likes to spend time, typical daily activities and how well your child can participate in family and community life . . . and what you'd like for your child to learn next.

*New Visions for the Developmental Assessment of Infants and Young Children* recommends the following to ensure a more accurate assessment:

-  **Young children should never be separated from parent(s):** Children should not be expected to perform tests well when they are anxious about being separated from their parents.
-  **Young children should never be assessed by a strange examiner:** Children should not be challenged to take tests in the presence of someone they may have just met minutes earlier.
-  **Formal tests or tools should not be the cornerstone of the assessment** of an infant or young child. Most standardized tests are not designed to bring out the unique abilities of children with atypical or challenging developmental patterns. Misleading scores from these tests can lead to inappropriate services. Structured tests should be only one piece of an integrated approach.
-  **Assessments limited to areas that are easily measurable should not be considered complete:** Measures of motor or cognitive skills are not an accurate picture of the child's total developmental capabilities. A complete assessment should look at all five areas of child development AND include independent observations of a child's interaction with the parent or daycare provider in the child's natural environment.

## Learning: All in a Day's Work

During all times of the day there are meaningful concepts, skills, language, and vocabulary words to be learned. Children learn in hands-on experiences at home, at daycare, and in a variety of situations throughout the rest of a baby's typical day.

Probably the most important thing parents can do to help their child's social-emotional and language development is to be attentive to a baby's attempts to communicate. Respond to a smile with a smile. When your baby reaches for you, respond with a smile and by picking him/her up. Learn to recognize when your baby's trying to tell you something and, even if you're not sure what he is trying to "say," respond to let your baby know that you hear him to reinforce his attempts to communicate.

Other things parents can do to assist their child's learning can be simple, like talking to an infant or toddler while completing typical child care tasks. Tell your baby the names of things you are using and a little bit about them, like "Here's the wipe. It'll get you all clean." Babies can learn a lot when the parent talks about what they're doing during typical child care activities, and also "narrate" what the baby is doing during these routines.

If you think about it, a baby's world revolves around his needs to eat, sleep, be changed and dressed, to play and be close and comforted by his family. The best way to teach your baby about his world is to talk to him about what is happening in the moment while involved in the activity.

**His world of eating:** Times of the day like eating and drinking become so routine that we often forget how important they are for babies. It's something that happens every 3-4 hours at first and when the baby has a full belly and someone to snuggle him while he eats, he feels protected and loved. Your words to accompany feeding are another way to express your love. When your child is crying

to let you know he's hungry, talk to him and say, "Mommy hears you. It sounds like you're hungry. I'll be right there. Here I am. Mommy will feed you now."

### **His world of being changed and dressed:**

Changing and dressing are activities that help a baby feel comfortable and soothed. You work magic when you change them and dress them in clean, dry diapers and clothes. Your words to accompany this time are another way to express your love. "Do you have a wet diaper? Oh, dear. I'm sorry. Daddy will help you. Let's put on a dry diaper. There. Daddy took off your wet diaper. That feels better! All dry, big boy!"

### **His world of playing and being**

**"entertained:"** Playing is another way babies learn, interact, and feel happy and satisfied.

As you jiggle a toy in front of him to capture his attention, your words to accompany this time are another way the baby will enjoy the interaction. "Here's your zebra--your favorite toy. Can you reach for it? Keep reaching, reaching, reaching. There! You got it! You got your zebra. Uh-oh! Zebra fell down. Mommy will pick up zebra."

### **His world of getting ready for bed:**

Bedtime is a special time when a tired and cranky child can look forward to a trusted bedtime routine that will soothe him and make him feel better. The sound of your voice talking to him about everything you are doing will also soothe him. "You are so tired. Let's go get your pajamas on. Here they are. First you have to get undressed. Mommy will take your shirt off. Here it goes, over your head. Peek-a-boo! I see you! Here are your pajamas. Put in one foot, another foot. Now put in your arm, and your other arm. Mommy will zip your pajamas. Zzzzzipp! Mommy zipped your pajamas."

*Coloring your baby's world with your words and lively intonation adds additional meaning.*





## Parent Question of the Quarter:

**Q:** My 9-month-old and I are in a Mommy and Me Music Class, but he's scared to participate. By the end of class, though, he's getting into it a little bit. Should I keep attending?

**A:** Stick with it. You're making important progress. While some children naturally go-with-the-flow and jump right into new situations, others are slower to warm up. They tend to be more comfortable in one-on-one experiences and can feel easily overwhelmed in a group. Another factor may be your son's sensitivity to sounds. He may love hearing music at home, but in a class, the noise and movement of the other children may at first be too much for him.

Here's how you can help your son feel safe and find pleasure in new relationships and experiences:

- Play with musical instruments at home and gradually add different sounds.
- Invite another child around your son's age to come over so he can get used to spending time with other children. Ideally the child should be familiar to your son and be a good "fit", i.e., easy to get along with.
- Give him opportunities to feel comfortable in group situations by attending other organized activities like play groups or story time at the library.
- If possible, arrive at the music class early to give your child a chance to explore the room without others around.

When in new or group situations, follow your child's lead. If he clings to you, help him explore from the safety of your arms or lap. If he needs a break, take a stroll around the room or go to a quiet area. If you give him the time and support he needs, he will soon feel safer to join the fun.

## INFANT/TODDLER MENTAL HEALTH

Babies are born into a social world and develop within relationships. Infant and toddler mental health focuses on relationships. It focuses on the social and emotional well-being of infants, the caregiver-infant relationship, and the contexts within which care giving takes place. From an infant mental health perspective, parents are looked at as interacting participants in the developmental process. Infant-caregiver relationships are the primary focus of assessment and intervention efforts, not only because infants are so dependent upon their care giving contexts but also because infant competence may vary widely in different relationships.