

# Parent Connections

FIRST CONNECTIONS – EARLY INTERVENTION IN ARKANSAS

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## Promoting Social-Emotional Development - Part 2

### Help your child experience the joy found in the "give-and-take" of relationships.

"Hey there happy girl!" Glenn says as he smiles at 3-month-old Kelly. Kelly looks up at her Dad and smiles. Dad makes a funny face and smiles, then Kelly lets out a gurgley laugh. Dad laughs at her as they continue to play funny face games back and forth.

Kelly is taking in a lot from what looks like a very simple interaction: "Hey, here's Daddy! It makes me feel so good when he plays with me. When he smiles at me, it makes me want to smile, too. I can tell he really thinks I am fun." Kelly is learning that others care for her, like being with her, and understand her needs. She's also beginning to understand that her actions (smile and laugh) affect other people's feelings and actions (Dad smiles and laughs back). She also can get another person to keep playing a fun game with her. In time, as she has the opportunity to experience satisfying relationships, she'll learn that she feels good when she makes others feel good. This will help her build healthy relationships and a positive sense of self as she grows. Learning about the



give-and-take of relationships will help her get ready a little later to play with other children and to share. Sharing, though, will not be easy for her until she is older—around 3 years old or so. She is also learning to recognize her own feelings and to care about others' feelings.

### Help your child feel safe.

Jayson, 18 months old, was on a walk with his father when he became frightened of a neighbor's dog barking from behind a fence. "Hey buddy, what's wrong? Is Buster making too much noise?" Jayson turned and ran a few steps back to his father who scooped him up in a hug. "Buster startled me, too. I guess he must be feeling a little grumpy today."

Jayson is learning that when he feels fearful, he can count on other people—like his Dad—to be there to support him. His father's sensitive response contributes to Jayson's growing sense of security and trust.

## Emotion Coaching

### 1. Listen with empathy.

Pay close attention when your child says how he feels, and then mirror what he's shared back to him. Use examples from your own life to show him you understand what he's said. Tell him about how you felt when your sibling got to go to the amusement park with your father and you didn't, and how your mom or dad made you feel better. This tells your child that everyone has these feelings, and that they will pass.

### 2. Help your child name her feelings.

With limited vocabulary and little understanding of cause and effect, toddlers often have trouble describing what they feel. Help your child build an emotional vocabulary by giving labels for feelings. If she's acting disappointed, you might say, "You feel sad about that, don't you?"

If your child seems sad or upset for no immediate reason, try looking at the big picture and think about what might be troubling her. Did you and your spouse have an argument? A recent move? If you're not sure what's going on, watch and listen while she plays.

### 3. Validate your child's emotions.

Instead of saying, "There's no reason to get so upset" when your child gets mad, acknowledge how natural her reaction is. Say, "It's really frustrating when you can't finish a puzzle, isn't it?" Telling her that her reactions are inappropriate or excessive will make her feel as if she should muzzle them.

### 4. Turn tantrums into teaching tools.

If your child gets upset about an appointment with the doctor, help him feel in control by preparing for the visit. Talk with him about why he's afraid, what he can expect during the visit, and why he needs to go.

### 5. Set an example by staying calm.

React calmly to your child's emotions. It's important not to be verbally harsh when you're angry. Try saying, "It upsets me when you do that," rather than "You make me crazy," so your child understands that the problem is his behavior, not him. Be careful to avoid excessive criticism, which tends to chip away at a child's self-confidence. Above all else, stay in touch with your own feelings. Hiding your real feelings will only confuse your child. By acknowledging that you're displeased without acting upset, you show your child that even difficult feelings can be managed.

## Managing Toddler Meltdowns

**No parent likes a "meltdown," but if we stay calm, we can use the tantrum as a teachable moment.**



In his book *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, psychologist John Gottman says that when you help your child understand and handle overwhelming feelings such as anger, frustration, or confusion, you help your child develop emotional intelligence quotient, or "emotional IQ."

A child with high "emotional IQ" is better able to cope with his feelings, calm him/herself down, understand and relate with others, and form strong friendships more easily than a child with a lower emotional IQ. A high "emotional IQ" helps children grow into confident, responsible, successful adults with better relationships skills. Parents can help their child develop a strong "emotional IQ" through "emotion coaching" -- a series of steps you can use to teach your child to analyze feelings and handle conflict (see sidebar).

### Use conflicts to teach problem-solving.

When your toddler goes head-to-head with you or another child, set simple and clear limits, then guide him toward a solution. For example, you can say, "I know you're upset with your sister for knocking over your block tower, but you can't hit her. What else can you do if you get mad?" If your child doesn't have any ideas, give him options.

Anger management specialist Lynne Namka advises telling your child to first check his tummy, jaw, and fists to see if they're tight, breathe deeply "to blow the mad out," and to feel good about recovering control. Then, Namka says, help your child use a strong voice to talk his anger out, beginning with something like, "I feel mad when you yell like that." Children should know that it's okay to be angry, as long as they don't hurt other people because they're angry.





## Tips for Healthy, Happy Eating



**Toddlers are notoriously picky eaters, but with a little patience, creativity, and a sense of humor, you can help your child become a happy, healthy eater.**

1. Offer 3 to 4 healthy food choices at each meal. Research shows that children will choose a healthy diet when they are offered a selection of different healthy foods.
2. Don't force your baby or toddler to eat. This can become a power struggle that results in children refusing the food and eating less.
3. Don't give up on new foods! Patience is the key. You may have to offer your child a new food 10 or 15 times before he/she will eat it. (and, in #1, try offering "familiar foods" with unfamiliar foods)
4. Turn off distracting noise like music, TV, phone, computers, etc) at meal and snack times. These sounds can distract children from eating. It also takes time away from talking!
5. Healthy eating and exercise go hand in hand, and active play burns calories and increases appetite. So make active play a part of everyday family life!
6. Children grow physically in different ways and "baby fat" may actually be "normal" and healthy. But, if you have a concern about your child's weight or activity level, talk to your child's health care provider. To learn more about feeding and young children, visit [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org) for publications, webinars, and support!



## Baby, Let's Eat!

**Feeding is one of a parent's most important jobs. It is how we help our children grow healthy and strong.**

Mealtimes are about much more than food, they're a time to connect with your child and to support overall development. Don't have him/her eat alone, instead sit with and talk with your child during meals, label food items and utensils, ask questions and wait for his/her response. This helps build strong social skills and strong family relationships.

Routines make children feel secure and help the child know what to expect as they look forward to each meal. Establish regular meal and snack times and routines beginning when your child is 9-12 months old.

Meal and snack times also give you a chance to help your baby or toddler:

- Learn healthy eating habits
- Feel important and loved
- Feel understood and respected
- Trust that others will care for him/her
- Feel good about his/her body



## Parent Question of the Quarter:

**Q:** My toddler has been at home with me since he was born. Do you think it is necessary that he begin preschool or child care in order to develop social skills?

**A:** Learning social skills is certainly very important for young children. The more experience they have interacting with peers, the more they learn about how to get along with others, and the richer their world becomes as they develop new relationships.

Interactions with other children can happen in many different ways. It is not necessary to send a child to child care solely to provide peer experiences. Other options are: joining parent-child classes, meeting other families with young children in your neighborhood and inviting them over to play, or going to the playground and other places where you would find families with young children.

Developing social skills is a process that takes time and experience. For example, learning to take turns and share are skills that evolve over several years, as children practice over and over how to handle these challenging situations. It is very helpful to young children when parents and caregivers coach them in this process, act as good role models for self-control and other social skills, and keep their expectations for children in line with their developmental age and stage.

Source: ZeroToThree.org

### Isn't It Grand?!

According to the Association of American Retired Persons (AARP), more than 5.8 million children across the United States are living in their grandparents' homes—and more than 2.5 million grandparents have taken on responsibility for raising their grandchildren. ZERO TO THREE and AARP offer grand-parenting resources:

Visit:

[www.aarp.org/grandparents](http://www.aarp.org/grandparents)

<http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/grandparents/>

