

# Honing your Baby's People Skills

It's time to help your baby learn people skills.

■ WORDS **DR NICOLA DAVIES**

**D**id you know that babies develop social and people skills very early on? Right from birth, and arguably even before it, babies begin to form relationships and their understanding of different people. Within three months, most babies gain familiarity with people, listen to and identify voices, and respond to positive speech and behaviours like smiling or a loving touch.

Of course, communication and other, more complex sociological and psychological behaviours are acquired gradually with experience. Babies learn interpersonal behaviours through experience and observation. However, the popular perception that infants don't understand the subtleties of behaviour and emotions is far from true.

## Fast Learners

Science has long proven that babies demonstrate social skills both in their early months and prior to birth. Babies develop a familiarity with their mothers' voice from the womb and are ready for the social world into which they emerge. According to Developmental Psychology Professor Matthew Hertenstein from DePauw University, Indiana, USA, newborn babies are drawn to and can identify with images of human faces. They are also extremely sensitive and aware of emotions like laughing and crying. Often, their own moods are influenced by the emotional displays of those around them.

Biological anthropologist and founder of Parenting Science, Gwen Dewar, explains the social abilities of



babies with an interesting analogy: "Think of a baby as a computer that comes preloaded with software designed to detect patterns in the social environment. This software guides infant development, helping babies learn crucial lessons about people, communication, and the world at large." According to Dewar, babies are surprisingly evolved, being sensitive to native languages, preferring to interact with people who make eye contact with them, and responding to facial expressions and gestures.

**The foundations of feelings – be it empathy, sensitivity, joy, or sadness – and the awareness of being treated fairly or unfairly, loved or neglected, begin much earlier than you might imagine.**



Meanwhile, psychologists at the University of York, England, UK conducted a longitudinal study of the language that a group of mothers used with their babies. The mothers and babies were observed when the babies were 10, 12, 16, and 20 months of age. The researchers observed that babies who were exposed to ‘mind-related speech’ were able to understand people’s feelings better by the time they were five years old. Mind-related speech is what you might say to your baby based on how you think they may be feeling after

seeing them act in a certain way. For instance, if your baby stares at a soft dog toy, you might talk to them about a dog they have seen at the playground. According to the lead researcher, Dr Elizabeth Kirk, these findings highlight how “a mother can tune into her baby’s thoughts and feelings early on to help her child learn to empathise with the mental lives of other people.” In other words, parents participate – consciously or otherwise – in the development of their babies’ people skills right from inception. But how can they best

tap into their infants’ innate social abilities to most effectively prepare their child for social interaction?

### Shaping Your Baby’s Social Life

Child and parenting experts the world over advocate different techniques for strengthening a baby’s already inherent social abilities. These include:

- Making eye contact
- Responding to your baby in their language of coos and gurgles
- Positive talk and gesturing

- The power of touch has also long been proven to have a long-lasting impact on a child's psychosocial development - even in the womb, a baby can sense their mother's touch if she rubs her stomach

“Give me a child and I'll shape him into anything.” – B. F. Skinner



While many of these techniques appear to be a matter of common sense, each is supported by scientific research.

Recently, Dr Victoria Leong and her team at the Baby-LINC (Learning through Interpersonal Neural Communication) Lab at the University of Cambridge, UK, discovered that making eye contact with your baby helps to sync your brainwaves with theirs. According to Leong, when an adult and baby look at one another, they communicate their intention to interact. The brains of both the infant and the adult respond to a gaze signal and become more synchronised. Used effectively, eye contact can enhance communication between parent and child and improve the child's learning.

David Brooks, in his book *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*, aptly states that parents need not be psychologists to have success in honing their babies' social skills. “Instead, parents just have to be good enough. They have to provide their kids with stable and predictable rhythms. They need to be able to fall in tune with their kids' needs, combining warmth and discipline. They need to establish the secure emotional bonds that kids can fall back upon in the face of stress. They need to be there to provide living examples of how to

cope with the problems of the world so that their children can develop unconscious models in their heads.”

In summary, encouraging face-to-face interaction, responding attentively, and providing a secure environment can help develop your baby's people skills and social behaviour.

### Sowing the Social Seeds Early On...

Care, love, attention, and communication – these are some of the fundamental pillars that build your baby's social skills and the foundations of their personality. Certainly, it is important to remember that children have varied levels of social ability. Therefore, how you use the tools of touch, interaction, encouragement, and gameplay will largely depend on your baby's likes, dislikes, and what they respond to. Furthermore, as they grow, children are exposed to influences beyond the exclusive primary socialisation they are used to during infancy. At this stage, the influence of peers, teachers, and others encourages them to learn more complex interaction and social skills. However, the traits they are encouraged to form as babies largely shape their later personalities and behaviours. For example, a child who has not experienced positive

interactions with a parent or caregiver may develop into a shy child who lacks self-confidence and finds it difficult to interact with people. On the other hand, children who share loving, caring, and encouraging relationships with people at home and outside may have little trouble with developing self-confidence and a sense of social self-worth.

Ultimately, when it comes to preparing your baby for the outside world, it boils down to recognising your baby's social personality early on and choosing how you behave with (and respond to) their subtle signals. Sometimes even in the womb, a baby can sense their mother's touch if she rubs her stomach. It is about caring and nurturing within your baby's personal comfort zone and giving them the attention they seek through their gestures, baby speech, and emotional displays. Babies are more sensitive and evolved than we give them credit for. Sowing the seeds of social behaviour at the outset can, therefore, have considerable impact on your baby's psychological and social development over time. So, the next time your newborn gurgles at you, don't underestimate the positive power that a similar response from you could have. This simple act not only enhances your relationship with your baby but also primes them for positive future social relationships. [m](#)



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