



# Empathy Summary

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## Why Empathy?

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you play an essential role in your infant's success. There are intentional ways to grow a healthy parent-infant relationship while forming a trusting, loving attachment that will develop empathy and help your infant to develop healthy relationships and establish foundational life skills in the future.

**Tip** These steps are best done when you and your infant are not tired or in a rush.

**Tip** Intentional communication and actively building a healthy parenting relationship will support these steps.

## Step 1. Getting to Know and Understand Your Infant's Input

- Consider how the distinct sounds of your infant's cries connect with their body language. It is okay if you are unsure or don't know what your infant is trying to communicate with you. Every infant is unique, and it takes time to learn. Check out these common cues and see if they match your infant's feelings and associated needs.
  - If infants are uncomfortable, they may issue a less intense, short, whiny cry like "eh, eh, eh."
  - If infants are scared, their eyes may remain open. Their head may move backwards. They may have a penetrating look and an explosive cry. They might suddenly extend their legs, arch their back, and then curl up again -- an involuntary startle response.
  - If infants are in pain, their eyes may be closed or may open for a second and look blankly into the distance. Parents often feel a greater sense of urgency with this cry. If it's gas pain, they may scrunch up their face and pull their legs up.
  - If infants are hungry, they may produce a cry that sounds either similar to anger or discomfort depending on the intensity. Cries can be short, low-pitched, and they rise and fall.
  - If infants are tired, they may be rubbing their eyes with them closing and opening. They may pull at their ears and yawn.

- Working to identify their specific cries and physical cues can help you be responsive to their needs. For example, if an infant is uncomfortable, respond by loosening or changing clothing or swaddling or changing their position and see if it helps to soothe.
- If your response to your infant's cues doesn't seem to help, that's okay. Test another response and see if it helps to soothe. It takes time to learn what your infant is communicating with you. As you practice, you'll get better at recognizing their style of communication.

Your infant will feel a greater sense of your understanding and responsiveness, so that your interactions become more two-way instead of one-way.

## Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Model empathy while interacting with your infant. Modeling empathy can be one of the greatest teaching tools.
  - Share the focus. As you spend time with your infant, follow their lead. They likely will signal with a short cry or simply change their attention when they need to shift their focus.
  - Notice gestures and listen for thought and feeling. Attempt to figure out what your infant is trying to tell you through their sounds, gestures, and facial expressions.
  - Infants require your attention to thrive. So, why not build a special time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your infant has to tell you?
- Ensure daily face-to-face interactions.
  - Talk up close to your infant. When your infant is in a high chair, crib, or stroller, make a point to get down on the same level. Narrate what's going on around you or tell a favorite memory or story.
  - When encountering new people or situations, get on eye level and introduce your infant to those new experiences to help them feel safe.
  - Express love up close. Children need to hear they are loved at every age. Start now and get in the habit of assuring your infant they are loved no matter what.
- Hold your infant close regularly. Infants require close contact with their parents. Skin-to-skin contact reduces stress and promotes immunity to disease. Heart rates sync up as well as emotions when infants are held closely.
  - Rocking in a rocking chair is a soothing way to connect and hold an infant.
  - Baby carriers offer a way to move about with your infant close to your heart.
  - Share the holding. Enlist other trusted family members or friends to share in holding your infant close.

## Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Allow your infant the chance to interact with new people of all ages with you close by their side.
- Create a consistent routine with regular nap times, play times, and meals. Routines create a sense of safety and security so that your infant can focus on learning and growing.

- Narrate your day as you go about your household chores or run errands in your community. This narration will offer your infant a sense of connection and offer practice in some of the building blocks of empathy such as listening to your thoughts and feelings.

## Step 4. **Support** Your Infant's Development and Success

- Learn about your infant's development. Each new age presents different challenges. Being informed about your child's developmental milestones offers you empathy and patience.
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like: *"I noticed how you smiled at the new person we met in the store."*
- On days with extra challenges when you can see your infant is scared of new people or situations, offer confidence in your infant's ability to face the unfamiliar. In a gentle, comforting voice, you can say, *"Anna is kind. You might enjoy meeting her."*
- Actively reflect on how your infant is feeling when approaching challenges. *"You seem worried about going into this new store. I'll hold you so you feel more confident."*
  - You can also offer comfort items to help your infant face new challenges. *"Would your blanket help you feel better?"* Swaddle your infant or you may use a pacifier to offer comfort.

## Step 5. **Recognize** and Celebrate

- Smile at your infant.
- Make eye contact.
- Use caring facial expressions.
- Be physically gentle and caring with your infant.
- Use words to celebrate and encourage: *"I notice you were smiling when you heard me make those silly sounds. I love seeing you smile. Those sounds make me smile too."*
- Build celebrations into your everyday routines. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

**Tip** The first year is filled with amazing changes -- and not just for your infant. Don't forget to recognize and celebrate your own development and milestones as a parent.

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