

Language & Learning

Positive Parenting

Giving Your Child Positive Attention

In the first few months of life, babies have some basic but very important needs. When we respond to these needs, babies develop a sense of security and trust. This becomes an essential foundation for later learning, loving and growing. What are these early needs?

- **Attention.** When your baby fusses, what do you do naturally? You pick him up and soothe him. This everyday routine helps your baby learn that he can count on you to respond to his needs.
- **Love.** You may hear people say that you should not hold a baby too much, or you will spoil him. In the first six months of life, it is impossible to spoil a baby. At these young ages, babies fuss for legitimate reasons, including unspent energy, hunger, teething. Our job as parents is to respond to these needs by holding, cuddling, feeding or soothing. These close moments convey a BIG message: I love you and I am here for you. This helps a baby bond to family members. When you give lots of cuddles and hugs, you meet your baby's emotional needs. You help your baby learn to show caring behaviors too.
- **Playfulness.** Parents of young infants are busy people. Throughout the day, you can steal all kinds of playful, enjoyable moments. Physical contact and cheerful interaction help your baby learn to socialize and be playful.
- **Patience and Consistency.** By nature, babies cry a lot. Cries are a baby's first way of communicating and getting his needs met. You may have already noticed that your baby cries in different ways to communicate different needs. A whimper might mean, "I'm not comfortable in this position." A strong cry might mean, "I'm really hungry and want to eat now!" Patient and consistent "answers" to cries and bids for attention are essential in the first six months. Consistency helps your baby learn to expect and trust that you will respond.

After 6 months of age, babies get smarter and start moving everywhere it seems! Babies are naturally curious, so they start to reach out and touch all sorts of things. This sometimes means trouble. As your baby starts to move about, use gentle ways to remove him from dangerous situations and to guide him. The *Parenting* guidebook says, "Most of baby's so-called bad behavior isn't fueled by a desire to annoy you. Babies get into trouble because it's their job to explore every cranny, to poke every button, to grab every interesting thing they see." (p. 258)

But as babies begin to move, we often wish that they would stop doing things, or not do something. Of course, growing up is really about learning what we should do. To encourage your baby or toddler to behave appropriately, you have to provide things that babies need. One of those is positive attention. Babies need attention, and you have control over the kind of attention that you give. When your baby frequently has your attention there is less reason to try inappropriate or irritating behaviors in order to get it.

You will give different kinds of positive attention as your baby's age changes. With infants, parents establish eye contact, smile, hug, cuddle and rock to provide attention. Parents of hearing children also sing, hum, play music, talk in an interesting voice or read simple stories, even to very small babies. How can you be sure that your baby gets the benefit of that kind of attention?

As you turn on your baby's hearing aids in the morning, try singing a little song. The rhythmic patterns of the song should attract baby's attention. As you repeat the song, your baby will start to recognize it and even expect you to sing it. He may show pleasure when he hears it. Once this song is old hat, try introducing other melodies. Your baby will enjoy rocking with you to soothing music or bouncing to the rhythms of an energetic song. Your baby learns early lessons about rhythms,

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pitch, oral communication and your language by listening to music and to your voice. When you call your baby's attention to the source of the sound, or accompany your vocalizations with interesting facial expressions, you encourage the baby to concentrate and hear even soft sounds. See the Learning through Play section of the website for additional ideas.

If your baby does not use amplification, early verbal communication still happens. It happens visually instead of through listening. Deaf mothers sign to their infants in special ways, just as hearing adults change their speech when talking to babies. Deaf parents make slower and larger movements in their signs, they move the signs into the baby's line of vision, and they add pleasant, loving facial expressions. Sign language has its own rhythms, emphasis and early communication forms, and your baby can learn important lessons from them because they are easy to see. These techniques will support you in giving positive attention in clear ways.

Toddlers love to have parents' attention. You can plan ahead to have special times together, playing or reading or pretending. This positive attention can include lots of natural language stimulation. Remember to follow your toddlers' lead and talk about what interests him. In a busy day, we don't always have time to give our undivided attention, and little ones may find inappropriate ways to try to get it. With some children, it can be effective to ignore certain behaviors, but others may need to be channeled to a different activity. It is good to consider why he is trying to get your attention. Have you been very busy? Do you need to show him another way to get your attention? Can you spend more quiet time with him?

Positive attention is more than just smiling when your baby pleases you. Babies need positive attention when they experience feelings. Although you would like to help your baby avoid certain feelings, learning and developing involve frustration and disappointment as well as excitement and pleasure. By naming your baby's feelings you will be preparing him to find positive ways to express those feelings later on. Try these ideas out:

Example 1: Your baby is playing peacefully in his booster seat, repeatedly hitting his mobile. As it sways, it brushes his nose and scares him. He begins to cry.

Pick which responses seem best.	Practice what you might say.
a) Move the mobile away.	Ouch!
b) Pick the baby up and cuddle Reassure him.	That scared you. Mommy is here. It's okay.
c) Don't let him play with mobiles.	No more mobile. Put it away.
d) After he settles down, play together with the toy and show him it will not hurt.	You like your toy. See, it is fine. Let's play.

Did you pick b) and d)? These responses give positive attention. They express what the baby is feeling and help him calm himself down.

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Example 2: Your baby is fussing and tugging at her hearing aid. She pulls it out and tries to put it in her mouth.

Pick which responses seem best.	Practice what you might say.
a) Take the hearing aids off and put them away for the rest of the day.	No, no.
b) Grab the hearing aid from her and put it right back in.	No eating. You need to wear this.
c) Gently take the aid and hug and calm her. Then put it back in.	It's okay sweetie. Are you bored? Did that bother you? Let's put it in.
d) Give her something fun to mouth and explore and then slip the aid back in.	Here's your rattle. Oh, you like to taste it.

c) and d) look like obvious choices, don't they? We want the baby to wear the hearing aid as much as possible so putting it away for the day is not the best option. We also want to respond in a gentle and matter-of-fact way when putting it back in. We can give positive and loving attention to calm her, then give her something to do while we put the aid back in.

Example 3: Your deaf baby is fussy in her infant seat and seems ready for a nap but will not settle down. She is fussy but doesn't want the bottle.

Pick which responses seem best.	Practice what you might say.
a) Pick her up, smile and sign to her. Touch her to soothe and quiet her.	You want mommy? Mommy loves you. You are sleepy.
b) Show her favorite toys and try to stop her fussing.	Here, let's play a new game.
c) Ignore her because she may just drift off to sleep.	
d) Rock her and sign simple ideas.	I love you. Bed time? Sleepy girl.

a) and d) seem to be the best choices. They give positive attention through face, signing and touch. Offering favorite toys may be overly stimulating if the baby is tired. Ignoring her misses an opportunity for closeness that will help your baby go to sleep.