



Your child is reading your expression

Little Cameron can walk, and life is suddenly very different. At 11 months old he can travel just about anywhere very quickly. The problem is, he's often quicker than his mother, so it's a challenge keeping Cameron safe while he explores his world. One day he's after the stereo controls and next he's into the kitchen pantry.

Yesterday it was the stereo knobs, today Cameron has discovered the pretty red tassels dangling from the edge of the tablecloth. He can't see what's on top of the table, and doesn't realize that if he pulls on one of the tassels a vase of flowers will come tumbling down. Across the room, his mother looks with fear and surprise as she realizes her son's plan. As Cameron begins to reach for a tassel he looks back at his mother. The look on his mother's face tells Cameron what he needs to know. He stops reaching for the tassel and moves away from the table. His mother, having vaulted across the room, quickly removes the tablecloth and its enticing tassels.



The answer is on your face

Cameron used what researchers call "social referencing" to decide what to do. In other words, he "read" his mother's face, recognized the fearful expression and understood he should not pull the tassel. Amazingly, Cameron knows what certain facial expressions and tones of voice mean—from "don't do that" to "it's okay to play with that." Research has shown that by 12 months of age babies use visual information from the faces of their caregivers to make sense of situations that are new or unclear (Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985).

As adults we do this all the time to obtain feedback from the world around us, but it's fascinating to learn how early this skill develops. In fact, by watching adults' facial expressions and listening to their tone of voice, babies as young as 10 months old can use emotional information to decide what to do (Walden & Ogan, 1988). For example, your child might check the expression on your face and the emotion it shows before deciding to pick up a new toy.

Mommy, Is This Okay?

Influence your child's actions
through simple facial expressions!



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Recognizing visual cues

One study looked at whether babies would play with new toys depending on how their mothers reacted to them. The results were clear: one-year-olds were less likely to play with a new toy if their mothers reacted negatively to it, and more likely to play with a toy if their mothers expressed positive emotions about it (Hornik, Risenhoover, & Gunnar, 1987).

To see if babies would use social referencing to make decisions, researchers had to create a situation that would be new and unclear to young children. In one experiment, researchers created a “visual cliff”—a plexiglass-covered table that had a “deep end” and seemed unsafe to cross. As they crawled over the table to get a toy, the babies reached the “deep end” and weren’t sure whether they should keep going. At this point, the babies looked at their mothers—and the researchers studied what the babies did (Sorce et al., 1985).

The mothers and their babies were divided into two groups. Mothers in the first group encouraged their babies to come toward the toy at the other end. As each child approached the visual cliff, the mother smiled, created a happy face, and using only her facial expressions, encouraged her baby to cross the table.

The second group of mothers also placed the toy at the deep end of the cliff, but as their babies moved closer to the “edge” these mothers showed a fearful face, again without talking or using their hands to add to the communication.

When the mothers posed a fearful expression, not one of the 17 babies ventured across the deep side. But almost all the babies who saw their mother’s happy face—14 out of 19—crossed to the deep end. These babies recognized their mother’s expression and decided what to do based on what they “read” in their mother’s face.



Your expressions and reactions count!

So, what does this mean to you and your baby? It means that your one-year-old is watching your face and learning from your expressions all the time. Your baby is developing the important skill of reading faces and emotions—and you are her first and most important teacher.

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Have fun interacting face-to-face with your baby. Let your baby see and learn about a wide range of emotional expressions.
- ★ Sometimes our faces may say one thing while our voices or actions say another. Since your baby is “reading” the emotions you express, try to provide clear examples of these emotions.
- ★ Your face tells your child a lot about how you feel. Share the things you enjoy with your baby along with communicating what to avoid.
- ★ Use positive emotions to introduce new things to your baby—like new people, new pets, and new toys.



Social referencing is something we do every day, whether we are aware of it or not. It’s an important skill that begins very early in life. You are teaching your child many important things as you go through the day. Your baby learns by watching you.

For more information on parenting and early learning, or to order copies of this Spotlight, visit www.ParentingCounts.org.

References:

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