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Infants & Toddlers: Understanding Confusing Expressions of Emotion

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By Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.

Confusing Expressions of Emotion

How to help a baby with unexpected emotional reactions

Dear Dr. Honig: I have a baby in my program who always bangs on his high chair and laughs uncontrollably. He seems to do this when he is hungry, but I really can't tell from his behavior what he wants. What's going on?

Young children pay close attention to adults' emotional responses. Their lives depend on knowing the best ways to get positive or at least neutral responses from the grown-ups in charge of their care. Babies learn early on how to cope with the unique care-giving styles of the adults in charge of feedings, diapering, playing, and bathing.

Set Clear Boundaries

Some babies learn that if they cry or protest, the consequences of their reaction will be negative. They discover that their crying may cause them to be ignored, isolated, or punished. Some young children are so attentive to the reactions of the significant adults in their lives that they even become "parentified." A toddling 3-year-old hears the new baby crying in his crib, glances at her frowning mom, and offers to go get a bottle from the refrigerator and give it to the baby. However, clear boundaries need to remain between the roles of adults and children. The adult's role is to protect, nurture, and provide experiences in doses appropriate to the child's ability to understand, interpret, and cooperate. The child's role is to develop secure feelings within a safe, protected, loving relationship. Babies should also develop courage and the skills needed to digest new learning, as well as gradually meet expectations for more mature behaviors.

Have Appropriate Expectations

Research shows that in some families, instant obedience is expected of very young children. A baby may be expected to refrain from touching a forbidden object even while struggling to gain control over muscles for walking and talking. Control over these muscles may well come before a toddler gains impulse control and self-reflection. When a baby toddles over to the coffee table and reaches toward an interesting item, her parent's response might be sharp and threatening: "Don't touch!"

Some parents love their little one, but are irked at the care he requires. They're uncomfortable with bodily snuggling and don't enjoy holding and caressing babies. Researchers characterize babies growing up in this environment as "insecurely avoidant-attached" to the parent. These babies learn not to ask for or demand holding, cuddling or

intimate attention. They often seem very “mature” when they enter group care. These babies don’t fuss when their parent leaves, or crawl or toddle to greet them upon return. They seem to adjust so well to childcare.

Pick Up On Signals

Some parents don’t realize that teasing or threatening a baby may seem playful to the adult, but presents a grave worry for the child. Despite her inexperience, a baby understands that there’s a warning in voice tones that is worrisome, and alerts her to watch out not to upset the adult. Sometimes babies learn peculiar ways to respond to perceived or real threats in order to keep the good will of the adult on whom they depend for their well-being. Suppose a mom playfully threatens that if the baby plays too roughly with his toy, then she will bang the “naughty” baby with the toy hammer he is using. Instead of looking up with troubled or sad eyes, crying, or freezing into a still posture, in fear, the baby giggles hysterically. This inappropriate laughter is a signal of mental distress. The baby doesn’t want to upset the adult with an appropriate sad, indignant, or frightened response. Instead the child uses an opposite reaction—wild giggles or laughter. This response is geared toward placating the adult or helping the threatening situation to “blow over.” The child learns to include such inappropriate behaviors as ways to manage uncertain, angry, or threatening gestures or words from adults.

Provide Nurturing Reactions

This perceptive teacher noticed that this baby—who is hungry and impatient for feeding—doesn’t whine, whimper, or yowl to protest his empty tummy. Rather, he is using the inappropriate response of wild laughter and banging his spoon. This baby needs special, gentle, nurturing interactions to provide a different pattern of relationships that can help him gradually learn to trust his own reactions, and his teacher. If he’s hungry, he can frown, whimper, or call out. He will learn he doesn’t need to laugh loudly to cover up his real feelings of tension or discomfort. If he’s frightened, it’s up to you, as his gentle teacher, to help him learn that he can express his fears in appropriate ways, such as by seeking comfort from you. You will be the special teacher who makes it clear that when he’s tired or upset, he can reach out his arms to you and crawl into your loving lap.

Offer Encouragement

Every baby deserves to have at least one secure attachment figure in life. When a baby has already developed a repertoire of behaviors that indicate a lack of tuning in to his real emotions of distress, the teacher needs to encourage him gently during all daily activities. A baby can feel and express his feelings directly. He will eventually not have to use screaming laughter as a peculiar signal of his uncertainty about expressing distress. He will learn that laughter and grins are associated with joyous and reassured feelings. He will learn that pouts, worried looks, and even crying are reasonable responses to feeling upset, hungry, tired, or frightened.

New patterns of interaction are learned over time. They become familiar and are practiced during intimate, leisurely activities with a beloved adult. Teachers who notice inappropriate reactions in a baby need to be patient. Keep on offering reassuring words as well as loving gestures. In a low voice, interpret situations so that a baby feels understood emotionally. He will hear you say a word for each of his feelings, whether he is puzzled or worried, or in a happy, rejoicing mood.

Box: How to Help

- Teachers need to realize that some children are not “allowed” to feel sad, frightened or angry. A baby’s parents may be particularly upset when he cries. Some adults call a baby a “sissy” if he is scared. Sometimes anxious children learn to cope by showing inappropriate smiles, wild giggles, or stony, blank faces. They do this in order to “please” a parent or avoid annoyed, or even punitive remarks and actions. The cherishing touches, cuddling, soothing, and reassuring talk that you provide are emotional vitamins to children. You can validate when a baby looks sad, worried, hungry, tired, happy, friendly, or puzzled by saying the appropriate emotional words.
- Share picture books where animals or children express their real feelings such as uncertainty, frustration, or exuberant joy. If you stub your toe in the classroom, say “Ow!” Tell children your toe feels sore and that you feel a bit sad. Toddlers learn to say “Owie!” when they hurt a finger, and often come over and present their finger for you to give it a magical, healing kiss.
- When the sky is blue and the wind is warm, push the babies in a group stroller and express your joy by sniffing the air and exclaiming, “I feel so happy! What a beautiful day for a walk!” Your patience as a teacher of honest emotional expression will pay off. One day this baby may bang his spoon and feel safe enough to simply call out “Nyum-nyum, now!”

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