



STRENGTHENING PARENT-CHILD EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

REFERENCE SHEET FOR STAFF ON FAMILY TIP SHEET



FIRST 3 YEARS

Beginning at birth, babies depend entirely on their caregivers to explore the world. A baby's need to form close connections and secure relationships is as critical as their need for food. Building a strong emotional connection with your baby supports your child's lifetime of learning.

The following are tips for building and strengthening emotional connection between a child and their caregiver:

TUNE IN:

Tuning in means being aware and responsive in the current moment with your child. Focus on taking turns. Practice following your child's focus as it shifts constantly. Be patient with yourself and remain flexible. When you and your baby share facial expressions or simple dialogue, the child is learning to understand the world around them including their relationship with you.¹

o Following the child's lead with genuine interest:

- Babies stare and point at many different things as they attempt to explore the world around them, whenever possible, grasp these moments and transform them into opportunities for growth. For example: Baby smiles. Parent smiles back. Baby coos. Parent coos back. Through warm and predictable back and forth interactions the baby learns that what they do impacts the world around them. These are the little interactions that give the baby a foundation of trust and confidence to build on for the rest of their life.²

o Eye contact:

- The eyes contain nerves that lead directly to key brain structures for understanding empathy and matching emotions. Mirror neurons ensure the moment someone sees an emotion on your face, they will at once sense the same feeling within themselves.³

- Healthy emotional connection is reinforced through eye contact with their caregiver. This form of non-verbal communication tells us if someone is listening and attending to us. When you gaze into your baby's eyes you are giving them the opportunity to focus on you and read what you are saying without the use of words. When a responsive caregiver gives a child a lot of pleasurable eye contact, this gives the child a sense of reassurance and security.⁴

o Exploring feelings:

- Similar to adults, children experience a range of feelings such as sadness, fear, and anger. Sometimes these feelings are very difficult for them to manage on their own. This is when it is critical for a trusted adult to step in, acknowledge their feelings, and stay with them until they are calm. If you respond sensitively when your child is crying, you are helping them process their emotions and they'll learn to understand that their needs will be met when they cry.⁵



TALK MORE:

Developing language is an important tool for creating a strong connection with your child that also helps build their brains for developing all other skills that they will need in life.

- o **Read to your child:** We know it is difficult to find time during the day to read to your child. Luckily, there are many opportunities to build a consistent routine and read to your child such as before bed-time or when they wake. Story books are a wonderful tool for very young learners and remember -- reading can happen anywhere.
- o **Narrate your day:** Children love to hear about what happened throughout your day, even when it is repetitive! Talk to your child about everything even about what you had for lunch and see how they light up.
- o **Help them explore the world:** Children want to discover and learn everything that they see, touch, and hear. Encourage discovery, answer questions, and show interest in what interests them.
- o **Talk about and help provide meaning to feelings:** When your child expresses their feelings over the loss of a toy, shoe, or pencil, acknowledge their feelings and talk out loud about them. This helps your child label feelings and know they can be shared without judgment or fear.³ Remember – all feelings are acceptable. Your child just needs your guidance and support to work through their feelings in safe, healthy and productive ways.

RESPOND:

No matter your child's age, you can take turns and have a conversation.⁶

- o **Always respond to baby's cues:** Attunement is the dance that caregivers and babies do. For example: Baby covers his/her eyes and caregiver joins in a game of peek-a-boo. Caregiver responsiveness allows the baby to get to know the parent, and the parent to get to know the baby. Through this dance, the baby learns to trust that their caregiver will come to them when they cry, feed them when they signal that they are hungry, and hold them to calm them down when they are feeling overwhelmed. When baby feels this trust that needs will be met, the brain is ready to develop the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that is responsible for self-control and more complex life and academic skills.⁷
- o **Repetition is great for brain building:** New skills are learned through practice and repetition within a safe and nurturing environment. The more you support children's practicing and mastering new skills, the stronger they grow.



TOUCH:

Physical closeness and a comforting touch from a parent helps establish emotional connection and can help calm a baby during moments of distress.⁸ As a parent, don't you just have days when all you need is to be wrapped up in the arms of someone that you love to make you feel better? Well, babies need that too!

o **Play:** Play is one of the key ways in which children learn and develop socially, physically, and behaviorally by building self-worth and giving a child a sense of their own abilities. Children are more creative when you are involved in their play! The best play occurs when an adult plays alongside the child with toys chosen by the child.

STAFF SUPPORT FOR PARENTS (NOT INCLUDED IN PARENT TIP SHEET):

It is critical to understand that no parent is perfect. As a result, seeking support is normal and strongly encouraged. Practice empathy with parents, and they will, in turn, practice those skills with their child. The following are additional strategies to share with parents:

o **Introduce family members to the tips above:** Relatives and close family friends can provide peer support to parents and can help support parents in building a strong emotional connection with their child(ren).

o **Discuss any concerns with a pediatrician:** Encourage parents to schedule and make it to every child well visit – even if their child isn't sick or in need of vaccinations. Parents can ask for more frequent appointments or ask for a referral to ECI if they have any developmental concerns such as developmental delays with the following areas: language or speech, vision, motor skills, social and emotional skills, and cognitive skills.

o **Connect with Early Childhood Intervention (ECI):** Parents do not need a referral to connect with ECI – parents can ask for an evaluation for their child any time before 36 months of age (if child is 3 or older then parents can ask for an evaluation from their local school district).

o **Seek self-care:** If parent is doing OK, then the child is likely doing OK! Parents' ability to take care of themselves is directly linked to the health, safety and learning outcomes of their children. Meditation or yoga practice, parent support or exercise groups, and online communities are all ways parents can seek self-care. It's important for parents to make time for themselves even when it feels like there is no time to spare.

First3Years' mission is to educate, advocate, and collaborate to advance the healthy development of infants, toddlers, and their families.

First3Years' work focuses on building long-term, sustainable solutions to advance the health and development of young children and their families. Our programs:

- Increase awareness of the critical importance of the first three years of life;
- Support conditions that enhance the quality of infant and toddler/caregiver relationships;
- Advocate for policies and practices that support the healthy development of young children; and
- Educate the birth-to-three workforce in best practices.

A key component of our work is focused on developing innovative solutions to longstanding problems with overlooked populations in our community.

Focusing on the health and development of young children and their families, First3Years works with the community to bring the critical importance of 0-3 to the forefront while also demonstrating and advocating for innovative solutions. Through education, advocacy and collaboration we involve the broader community to work together in improving the lives of infants and toddlers, their families and communities in Texas.

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¹<https://tmwcenter.uchicago.edu/the-3ts/what-are-the-3ts/>

²<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/>

³https://consciousdiscipline.s3.amazonaws.com/Free-Resources/Printable-Posters-Tools-Activities/FREE-Printable-4_Elements_Connection.pdf

⁴<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/>

⁵<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/>

⁶<https://tmwcenter.uchicago.edu/the-3ts/what-are-the-3ts/>

⁷<https://babyday.us/resources/love-attachment/>

⁸<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/>