

Smile and the world smiles

Add a SMILING workout to your routine with a baby: strategies to keep the interaction going!

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A smile, like a yawn, is contagious, according to researchers. When a baby smiles, we can't help but smile back. Best of all, a smile spreads far beyond the immediate benefit. In fact, smiling and its positive effect is linked to secure attachment in infancy (Everett Waters, Judith Wippman and L. Alan, 1979). These moments of positive interaction are also linked to the development of communication and enhanced social interaction (Shirley V. Leew, 2008).

First smiles ... on the way to becoming a social partner!

Children learn the power of communication before they learn to talk. The ability to smile is part of a set of early social communication skills that paves the road to interaction, communication and language. According to research, smiling was originally designed as a survival reflex. Hypothetically, smiling babies would have more frequent and longer exchanges with adults and therefore, would have their basic needs met more often than babies with fewer smiles. This seems true even now: when smiled at by a baby, we will often stay focused on the infant for a longer period of time.

Why is smiling important? Through this back-and-forth exchange between baby and adult, the baby starts to engage in a “social dance” which will eventually lead to intentional communication.

As far as parent response is concerned, “the more the better” principle applies. When an adult reacts with a positive effect (smiling, sounds, giggles and wiggles), there is more chance that the child will try to reproduce that behavior. (Shirley V. Leew, 2008)

Babies smile in response to a parent's actions, tone of voice and facial expressions. Then, they smile to get attention and maintain the caregiver's attention. With these skills, babies are demonstrating that they are becoming “social” little people. But what they are also showing goes beyond the immediate. They are showing that they have the ability to communicate in a “language” that everyone can understand. And the result

radiates outward like ripples on a pond – more social exchanges and more communication.

Smiles and facial expressions... indicators of growth or delays!

For most children, smiling and sharing emotions to interact and communicate will occur naturally. However, for some children, it may be more difficult for them to understand the value of smiling and facial expressions for the purpose of communication. This may put them at-risk for communication delays. How is that so? For communication to develop, one important component is positive effect sharing.

Positive effect sharing is the ability to use smiling and sharing of emotions through facial expressions, eye gaze shift and eventually through gestures and sounds. These are all critical milestones in learning to talk. Research suggests that this positive interest in being with others facilitates the development of other communication skills (joint attention, meaningful communication, enhanced social interactions), helps children develop secure attachment in infancy and provides the child with experience for later competence in peer groups (Everett Waters, Judith Wippman and L. Alan Sroufe, 1979). In a nutshell, positive effect sharing puts a baby in a positive learning mode (Shirley V. Leew, 2008).

In conclusion, first smiles are part of early skill sets that lay the foundation for communication. A parent response to early social smiling and emotion sharing is key in helping children become intentional communicators. So next time you see a baby, you might want to try out the First Words “smiling workout” with him or her. Keep smiling!

Milestones

- 0-six weeks: Reflexive smile
- At six weeks: First real social smile may occur
- Between four to six months, a baby may start to: use emotion and facial expression intentionally to communicate
- show positive interest in others;
- initiate smiles with expectations of smiles
- By 9 months, positive effect sharing should be well established.

Early identification makes the difference. Families can access First Words community screening clinics at any time, visit the First Words Preschool Speech and Language Program website at www.firstwords.ca or call OPHI for more information at (613) 580-6744.

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