

# BEHIND EVERY CHILD BEHAVIOR, THERE IS A FEELING



Challenging behavior in young children often triggers strong reactions in parents and caregivers. When parents feel angry, overwhelmed, frustrated or embarrassed, it can be difficult to figure out what is driving a young child's actions. Sometimes a child may even seem to be trying to get a rise out of their parent! But behind every child's behavior is a feeling that they're experiencing, too. When parents and caregivers learn to recognize the feelings behind their children's behaviors, parenting is easier. Also, the more parents understand about their children's behaviors, the closer they feel to their children and the better they can express care and love to them. Children who feel cared for and loved develop stronger social-emotional skills like confidence and self-esteem, which make it easier for them to manage their emotions so they can do better in school and beyond.



Small children have big feelings.

The behaviors babies and toddlers use to communicate with their parents and caregivers depend a lot on their age and development. Very young babies cry when they're hungry, uncomfortable, or tired. As they get older, they learn to communicate using words, facial expressions, and gestures, too. By observing their children closely, and with a little practice, parents and caregivers can learn to translate the behavior they see—throwing food off a high-chair, for example, or having a tantrum when dropped off at child care. The effort to understand the feelings behind a child's behavior can bring a parent and child closer, and help that parent teach their child the social-emotional skills they will need to learn and grow.

But how do you know if a baby is crying at night because they're hungry or scared? And how do you learn to tell if a toddler is having a tantrum in the store because they want a toy, or are tired?

## BE A "FEELINGS DETECTIVE"

Parents and caregivers can learn a lot about their child by watching them from birth. What makes them anxious? How often do they get hungry? Are they fussier when they're tired? It helps to learn your child's patterns, and to imagine what they might be feeling. In a challenging situation, you might try asking yourself, "What else could be going on here?" This can help you respond calmly and consistently to their needs.



## BE KIND TO YOURSELF

It's easier to be loving and patient when a child is smiling and playing than when they're crying or being demanding. But difficult behaviors are a typical part of early childhood, and it's natural for parents to have all kinds of feelings about these challenges. Respect your feelings, make sure your child is safe, and let yourself take a break if you need to regain your cool. When you can calm yourself during challenging times, you're letting your baby know they can rely on you to help them manage their own emotions.

## BUILD A TOOLBOX TOGETHER

As your child develops, you can teach them to recognize their feelings by naming them, such as "It's frustrating when you can't get what you want", or "It can get so boring when you have to wait". You can also help them identify simple choices they can make to feel better, such as "Let's wait our turn by playing with these blocks instead", or "Let's sing a song while we wait". Offering alternatives helps them learn to express themselves in better ways that will serve them throughout life.

# LEARNING ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

Here are some basic age-appropriate ways that you can support your child's feelings:

## BIRTH TO 9 MONTHS OLD

- Talk, read, and sing to your baby. By holding, cuddling, singing and talking to your baby every day during daily routines, you provide the nurturing their growing brains need. And your baby needs your loving touch and soothing words just as much when they're fussy to help them feel special. A bonus is that these bonding moments help you feel better, too.
- Help your child transition to a new caregiver. A favorite toy, stuffed animal or blanket can help comfort your baby in unfamiliar situations. Also, be aware of your own response to a new caregiver when your baby is present; your baby can notice concern in your facial expressions and body language even when they are very young.

## 9 MONTHS TO 18 MONTHS OLD

- Be an emotional role model. Even at a young age, your baby learns by watching you. Taking a deep breath during stressful situations, expressing joy when you're happy, and letting your child know that you love them helps them learn how to behave with others.
- Be aware of developmental stages. Though your baby is becoming a toddler, they're still not capable of doing things that older children can do, like sharing toys or playing one-on-one with other children. The more you know about what your child is capable of at a certain age, the more prepared you'll be for the times when they need a little more help to get along with others.





Want to learn more about the feelings behind your child's behaviors? Check out our video "Small Children Have Big Feelings" and find more tips at [talkingisteaching.org/big-feelings](https://talkingisteaching.org/big-feelings)

## 18 MONTHS TO 24 MONTHS

- Talk about feelings. As your child learns new words, ask your child to think about how they're feeling, and offer words to help them express difficult emotions.
- Help your child develop appropriate responses. Young toddlers need guidance to understand the appropriate ways to behave when they're angry, disappointed or frustrated. You can help them by hugging them, telling a story, singing a song, or giving them a favorite toy or blanket so they can self-soothe.

## 24 MONTHS TO 36 MONTHS

- Offer choices. Older toddlers typically want to feel some control over their environment. Let them decide how they will accomplish tasks, or offer simple "either/or" choices. Simple choices can reduce conflicts and help your child learn to communicate their needs and wants using words.
- Praise good behavior. Be specific about what they did right, and how that made you feel.

*Special thanks to Dr. Joshua Sparrow and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center for their guidance on these materials, and inspiring work on children's development. More at <https://www.brazeltontouchpoints.org/>.*