

Pediatricians can Enhance Early Parental Ability to Decode Infant Gestures

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Pediatricians are at the forefront for nurturing and reassuring new parents as to the physical and physiological normalcy of their infant's development. They can also be powerful teachers to ensure that new parents, feeling sleep-deprived and puzzled by some baby behaviors, will create strong positive bonds with baby and nourish secure infant attachment to each parent. Pediatricians can help new parents to interpret infant gestures and body postures. Insightful decoding skills can ease new parents' worries and reassure them that they are indeed responsive, attuned caregivers for their infant.

The Cry

Evolution has provided babies with wonderful gestural and vocal tools for getting the care and loving attention they need from caregivers. The cry is the most primitive and powerful tool for bringing help when baby is distressed. The loud cry of a hungry baby is strong enough to cause a let- down reflex for milk in nursing moms. Hungry babies feel such bodily need for a nursing! Pediatricians can remind parents that babies, awesomely, will triple their birth weight in the first year of life! Some infants nurse avidly with quite loud sucking sounds. Others are quieter. Some babies are "snackers". They suck a bit on a nipple, and then pull away to gaze about before going back to nursing. Some babies love to curl their fingers around a parent's finger, whether being bottle or breast fed. Some babies have the ability to wait a few hours between feedings. Others feel ravenous and must nurse more frequently. Each baby has personal bodily styles to communicate comfort or distress. Parents need to tune in and recognize each baby's personal gestures that signal a particular discomfort. Babies a few months old may sometimes have a long crying period in late afternoon. They need to be held reassuringly and jiggled gently as a parent walks back and forth with baby in arms. Some distress cries are piercing, as when a baby gets a shot during a pediatric visit, or when babies feel that their body position has been very suddenly changed. Babies emit sudden high-pitched cries of discomfort if they have a gas bubble and need urgently to be burped. Some cries are far more moderate, just 'snuffling' as when baby wriggles the body to get comfortable physically just before fallCitation: Honig AS. Pediatricians can Enhance Early Parental Ability to Decode Infant Gestures. Enliven: Pediatr Neonatal Biol 2019;6(2): e004.

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ing asleep. Gestures signaling a need for a nap include drowsy, half- lidded eyes, and a bobbing head.

Pediatricians are in an ideal relationship, as wise mentors, for helping new parents learn to interpret accurately a variety of baby facial frowns, cries, and body gestures and thus help affirm parents' own growing competence at learning the style and preferences of this new little one. They can watch for whether baby sinks into somatic certainty on a parent's body and positively rejoice with the parent about how much this baby has learned to trust this special person!

Smiles

Baby's first smiles bring joy and more loving parental feelings. An infant's charming, crooked grin evokes tenderness, smiles, and nurturance from adults delighted at this gesture of friendliness and pleasure directed toward them as early as 2-3 months of age.

Holding on and Touching

Loving caregiver touches are critical for infant growth and development [1]. Babies' touches may be more uncoordinated and vigorous, as they tug on a parent's hair or beard. They clutch the neck with fingers; they grab at and explore a beloved parent's face with gestures that psychoanalyst Mahler has termed "customs inspection" [2]. Reassure new parents that baby may poke fingers in a mouth and pull at eyeglasses by nine months in order to get to know the parent better- and that the baby is not being "aggressive" – so that parents can appreciate baby's efforts at getting acquainted more personally even as good-natured adults firmly help a baby learn to touch more gently.

Vocalizations

Newborns make throaty vowel sounds, called 'coos.' Pediatricians can affirm for new parents how important it is to vocalize back and forth in gentle ways, using high pitched loving, drawn-out tones ("parentese") with a tiny baby. Infants delight

in these socially close interactions. A baby becomes quite worried when a parent, in the midst of such a pleasurable smiling, vocalizing game suddenly stops and simply looks expressionless. Pediatrician Dr. Berry Brazelton has shown, in his splitscreen research, how distressed a very young baby reacts if a parent suddenly halts this loving interchange. Parents also need to recognize the clear infant gesture of turning eyes and head away when feeling overloaded. When feeling over stimulated, some infants stiffen and arch the back.

Gestures that Reveal Causal Understandings

An older baby gives a toy to a parent to 'work' the toy for him or her. Baby cleverly puts a parent's hand on a toy, thus signaling that he or she wants the parent, for example, to set a toy top in twirling motion again -- a gesture still too difficult for baby to manage. Encourage parents to feel proud that baby is now beginning to understand causality. In order for a toy to work there must be an agent. And if baby cannot manage to work a toy alone, she or he now realizes how to get the parent as "agent" to set interesting toys into motion. Some toys, such as rattles to shake, can be managed by a baby a few months old. But spinning a top is still far too hard. So baby recognizes the parent as the special causal agent now needed for this task!

A mobile baby may crawl over and heap toys and favorite picture books onto a seated parent's lap. Help parents rejoice at these infant signs of intimacy and closeness, rather than consider them an unwelcome interruption of an adult's desire, for example to read the newspaper in peace. Pediatricians will be alert to signs that baby at about 9 -10 months can engage in joint attention with a loved and loving adult. Babies who are on the autism spectrum may well have more difficulty with joint attention gestures. At about 10 months, baby perfects an imperious gesture, using a pointed index finger to draw an adult's attention to a wanted toy. Held in arms, baby can also follow visually a parent's pointing out interesting scenes at a window, such as a fire engine truck roaring by. Baby may now lift arms to signal "I would love to be picked up and snuggled." A tuned- in parent knows when baby wants to be picked up for a hug or to be carried to a specific place. Most babies under one year have very few words. Learning to interpret a baby's cries, smiles, vocalizations, body and hand gestures effectively gives a parent a more accurate road map to meet an infant's needs. Pediatricians can serve as excellent guides to boost a new parent's ability to "read" and decode each baby's cues and personal repertoire of cries, smiles, and other bodily motions in order to ensure a more harmonious parent-infant relationship during the first year of life. Preverbal infants are active communicators. Pediatricians can further family skills in responding to infant cues so that the baby grows up feeling more and more competent and intimately cherished.

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