

Cues



What are Cues?

Cues are a signal from one person to another to do something. They are a child's way of telling you what he or she wants, even without using words.¹

Why are Cues Important?

- Noticing cues and responding to meet a child's needs:
 - Contributes to healthy attachment.
 - Teaches children how to regulate their own emotions, trust others, and build healthy relationships.
 - Promotes security by helping children feel cared for and understood.
 - Helps children feel safe enough to explore and learn about their world.
 - Makes caregiving easier and more rewarding.



What Can Be Done?

- Practice learning to understand what children are telling you through their signals.

Engagement cues encourage people to be with, pay attention to, or play with a child.¹

- Smiling
- Vocalizing
- Making eye contact with caregiver
- Reaching out to caregiver
- Turning eyes or head toward caregiver
- Lip smacking and other feeding sounds

Disengagement cues signal the need for a break or rest, which may be long or short.¹

- Crying or fussing
- Turning head and/or body away from caregiver
- Squirming or kicking
- Back arching or pulling away
- Coughing, choking, spitting up or vomiting
- Falling asleep



1. Adapted from "Nursing Child Assessment" (from satellite training, University of Washington, Seattle, 1990.)

MORE INFORMATION



Understanding Your Child's Behavior: Reading Your Child's Cues from Birth to Age 2

From the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.



Baby Talk: Nonverbal Infant Communication

From Psychology Today.



Understanding Your Child's Behavior: Reading Your Child's Cues from Birth to Age 2

Does this Sound Familiar?

Jayden, age 9 months, has been happily putting cereal pieces into his mouth. He pauses for a moment and then uses his hands to scatter the food across his high chair tray. He catches his father's eye, gives him a big smile, and drops a piece of cereal on the floor. When his father picks it up, Jayden kicks his legs, waves his arms, and laughs. He throws another piece of cereal. His dad smiles and says, "Jayden, it looks like you are all done eating. Is that right?" He picks Jayden up and says, "How about we throw a ball instead of your food, okay?"

Naomi, age 30 months, is happily playing with her blocks. All of a sudden, her mother looks at the clock, gasps, and says, “Naomi, I lost track of time! We need to go meet your brother at the school bus! Let’s go.” She scoops Naomi up and rushes toward the kitchen door. Naomi shouts, “NO!” and tries to slide out of her mother’s arms to run back to her blocks. When her mother puts on Naomi’s sneakers, she kicks them off, slaps her mother’s hands, and repeats, “No! I STAY! I playing blocks!” Naomi’s mother sighs with frustration and buckles her into the stroller with no shoes. This sets off another round of protests: “My SHOES! Where my SHOES?” Naomi pulls at her stroller’s buckle, trying to unfasten it, and kicks, screams, and cries all the way to the bus stop.

The Focus

Babies and toddlers might just be learning to talk—but they have many other ways to tell parents how they are feeling! Children can experience the same emotions that adults do, but they express those feelings differently. Jayden is giving his father many clues that he is done eating. First, he begins to play by sweeping the food across his tray. Then he drops food on the floor in an attempt to get his Dad to play the “I Drop It, You Get It” game. Jayden’s father notices and responds to these “cues,” by calling an end to mealtime and giving Jayden a chance to play. Naomi is also very clear about her feelings. She doesn’t like having to make a transition from a fun activity (blocks) so quickly. She is giving her mother many “cues” too—her words, facial expressions, and actions are all saying, “This transition was too quick for me. I



was having fun and I can’t move on so quickly.”

Children’s behavior has meaning—it’s just that adults don’t always understand what the meaning is. In the early years, before children have strong language skills, it can be especially hard to understand what a baby or toddler is trying to communicate. This resource will help you better understand your child’s behavior cues and help you respond in ways that support his or her healthy social and communication development.

What to Expect: Communication Skills

Birth to 12 Months

Did you know that crying is really just a baby’s way of trying to tell you something? Your baby’s cry can mean many different things, including, “I’m tired,” “I don’t know how to settle myself,” “I’m in pain or discomfort,” or “I want the toy you just picked up.” In the first year, babies will gradually begin to use gestures and sounds to communicate. But many parents find the first 12 months one of the most difficult times to understand the meaning of their babies’ behaviors. Below are some common ways babies communicate. With time, you will figure out your baby’s unique way of communicating.

Sounds: Crying is your baby’s primary communication tool. You might find that your baby uses different cries for hunger, discomfort (like a wet diaper), or pain (like a tummy ache). Paying attention to the sounds of these cries helps you make a good guess about what your baby is trying to communicate.

Language: Right around the one-year mark (for some babies earlier, and for some babies later), your baby will say his or her first word. While at first your child’s language skills will seem to grow slowly, right around the two-year mark they will really take off!

Facial Expressions: The meaning of a smile is easy to understand. But you will also get to know your baby’s questioning or curious face, along with expressions of frustration,





pleasure, excitement, boredom, and more. Remember, babies experience the same basic emotions we do: happiness, sadness, curiosity, anxiety, frustration, excitement, and so on.

Gaze: Look where your baby is looking and it will tell you a lot about what he or she is thinking. An overstimulated or tired baby will often break eye contact with you and look away. A baby who wants to play will have a bright gaze focused right on you or the toy she is interested in!

Gestures: Babies use their bodies in many ways to communicate. They reach for people and objects, pick objects up, sweep objects away with their hands, wave their arms and hands and kick their feet, and point (just to name a few). Babies will also turn away from sounds they don't like or arch backwards if they are upset.

Putting It Together

Babies use their whole body to communicate. So, for example, a baby might focus a bright, clear gaze on a new toy, and then look to you, then back at the toy. She might kick her legs or swing her arms excitedly. The baby might then reach for the toy while making excited “eh eh!” sounds

and smiling. While babies don't think in words yet, the message this baby is sending might be, “What is that thing? I want to see it. Can you give it to me? It looks like fun!”

Or imagine a baby who is happily playing with an older cousin. The cousin is puffing out his cheeks and then letting the air out, making a loud whooshing sound. The baby is laughing, kicking, and waving his arms. All of a sudden, though, the baby's response changes. He looks away and his expression turns to one of distress. He kicks his legs and arches his back. He starts to cry. The message this baby is sending might be, “That was fun for a while. But now it's too much. I need a break.”

12 Months to 24 Months

In the second year, young toddlers are becoming more skilled at communicating their needs and desires to you. Here are more examples of how young toddlers' communication skills are growing and changing from 12 to 24 months.

Sounds and Language: Your young toddler's vocabulary is growing slowly but steadily across his or her second year of life. Pronunciation might not be perfect, like “muh” for milk, but that will

come with time. Your toddler also understands more words than ever before. In fact, he probably understands more words than he can actually say! For example, if you ask him to touch his nose, chances are, he will be able to do so.

Even as your toddler's language skills are growing, cries are still the main way to communicate strong emotions like anger, frustration, sadness, or feeling overwhelmed. You might also see your toddler squeal with laughter and scream in delighted glee when he is too excited for words!

Facial Expressions and Gaze:

Toddlers make some of the best expressions ever, so keep your camera handy during this second year of life. You can see delight, curiosity, jealousy, and other feelings play across their faces. Young children also use eye contact to communicate with you. For example, you might see your toddler gazing at you to get your attention (Won't you come play with me?). You might also see your child watching you to learn something new (Now how do I press the cell phone buttons?).



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Your toddler also watches your reactions to make sense of new situations (I am not sure I want Uncle Joe to hold me. I am going to check your face to see if you think he is okay or not.) Often you will find that your child mirrors your own expressions and gestures—if you take a bite of broccoli and crinkle your nose, chances are good that your toddler will too.

Gestures: Young toddlers are more talented than ever at using their bodies to communicate. They can walk, run, point, take your hand, show you things, carry and move objects, climb, open and shut things, and more. Watching your toddler's body language and gestures will give you lots of information about what she is thinking about, what she wants, or what she is feeling.

Putting It Together

Over time, it becomes easier to understand your child's cues and messages. Young toddlers are skilled at using their bodies, expressions, and growing language skills to communicate their needs more clearly than ever before. A 14-month-old might creep over to the book basket, choose a favorite story, creep back to her uncle, and tap the book on his leg while saying, "Buh." A 20-month-old might pick up her sandals and then walk to the back door, turn to her grandmother and say, "Go park." These interactions are really an amazing developmental leap for toddlers! They are now able to hold an idea in their minds ("I want to read a book and not just any book, this book") and understand how to communicate that idea to the people who can make it happen!

Three Steps to Understanding Your Baby's or Toddler's Behavior

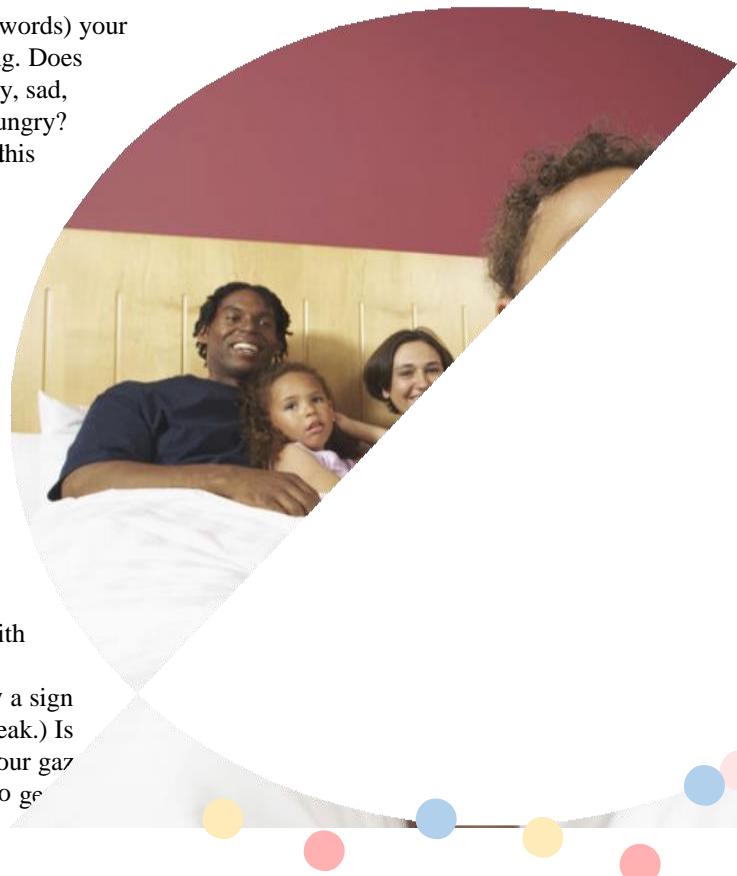
When you see a behavior you don't understand, think about these "clues" to try to figure out what the behavior means for your child. Remember, every child is different. The same behavior (for example, a baby who is arching her back while being held) can mean that one baby is tired and that another baby wants to be put down so she can stretch out and play. Getting to know your child's unique cues is an important way that you can show your child that you love and understand him or her.

Step 1: Observe and interpret your child's behavior:

- Notice the sounds (or words) your baby or toddler is using. Does your child sound happy, sad, frustrated, bored, or hungry? When have you heard this cry or sound before?
- What is your child's facial expression? What feelings are you seeing on your child's face? Is your baby looking at a new object with interest? Perhaps he is trying to say, "Hand that to me so I can touch it."
- Notice your child's gaze. Is your baby holding eye contact with you or has she looked away? (That is usually a sign that a baby needs a break.) Is your toddler holding your gaze? Perhaps she is trying to get

attention or wants to see how you are reacting to a new situation.

- What gestures or movements is your child using? Is your baby rubbing her eyes and pulling on her ear when you try to hold her? She might feel sleepy and be ready for a nap. An older toddler who is on the verge of beginning potty training might start to hide behind a chair or go into a closet to have a bowel movement.
- Think about what's going on when you see a behavior you don't understand. Does this behavior happen at a certain time of day (like at child care drop-off or bedtime)? Does this behavior tend to happen in a certain place (like the brightly lit, noisy mall)? Does the behavior happen in a particular situation (like when your child must cope with many other children at one time, like at the playground)?





Step 2: Respond to your baby or toddler based on what you think the meaning of his or her behavior is. It's okay if you are not sure if your guess is right. Just try something. Remember, you can always try again. For example, if your 11-month-old is pointing toward the window, lift him up so he can see outside. Even though you might discover he was really pointing to a spider on the wall, the very fact that you tried to understand and respond lets him know that his communications are important to you. This motivates him to keep trying to connect with you. When you respond to your child, say out loud what you think his behavior might mean. For example, you might say to the toddler you pick up, "Are you saying that you want up? I can pick you up." By using language to describe what the child is communicating, you will be teaching your child the meaning of words.

Step 3: If your first try didn't work, try again. Trying different techniques increases the chances that you will figure out the meaning of your child's behavior, understand his needs, and

validate his feelings. If your four-month-old is crying but refuses a bottle, try changing her position—picking up and rocking or putting her down

Remember that communication, too. A tantrum usually means that your child is not able to calm himself down. Tantrums are no fun for anyone. They feel overwhelming and even scary for young children. For adults, it is easy to get upset when you see upsetting behavior. But what frequently happens is that when you get really upset, your child's tantrum gets even bigger. Although it can be difficult, when you are able to stay calm during these intense moments, it often helps your child calm down, too.

Another strategy to try when your child is "losing it" is to re-state how your child seems to be feeling, while reflecting her strong emotions. You might say in a very excited voice, "You are telling me that you just cannot wait for the birthday party! It is just toooooo hard for you to wait! You want to go the party right now!" For some children, having you "mirror" their intense feelings lets them know that you understand them and take them seriously, which helps them calm down. Experiment to see which response works best to calm your child.

Remember: You can't always understand what your child is trying to communicate. Even in adult

relationships, we sometimes find ourselves wondering about the meaning of another person's behavior. But these moments—when your child is distressed and you can't figure out why—can be very stressful for parents. If you feel as though you really cannot handle your baby or toddler in the moment, it's okay to put him or her somewhere safe (like a crib) and take a few minutes for yourself. Taking care of you is important. You will make better parenting choices and be able to meet your child's needs more effectively if you are feeling calm and together.

Wrapping Up

Babies and toddlers experience and express thoughts and feelings. Often they communicate their strong feelings through behaviors that adults understand right away—like a baby's big toothless grin when she sees her grandma coming. Other times, very young children's behavior can be confusing or even frustrating to the adults who care for them. Being able to stay calm, make a good guess at what the behavior might mean, and then respond helps children understand that they are powerful communicators. Over the long-term, this helps children learn how to connect with others in ways that are healthy and respectful—a skill they'll use for life.



The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



Child Care Bureau



Office of Head Start



Baby Talk: Nonverbal Infant Communication

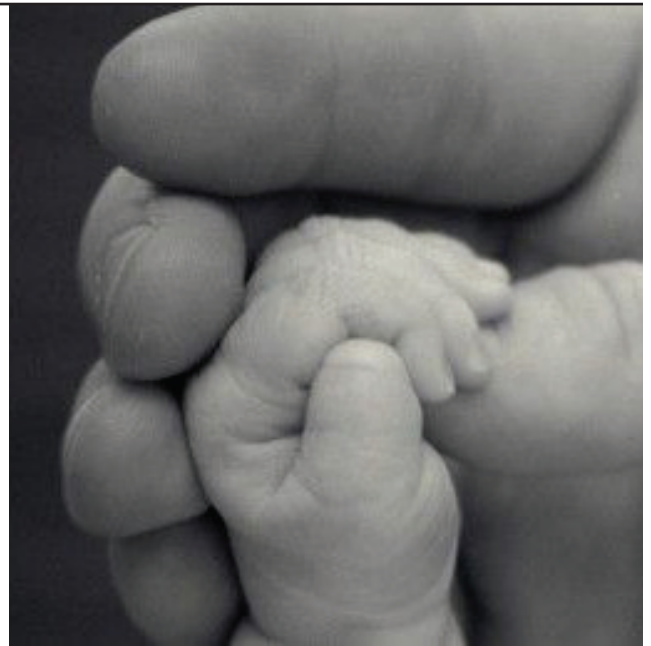
Learning how to understand your baby without words



Robert T Muller Ph.D.

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Psychology Today's "Talking About Trauma"



It would be hard to imagine living in a world in which you couldn't use language to communicate basic wants and desires to others. And yet, babies very much find themselves in that position prior to acquiring verbal skills.

Babies actively communicate. But they must use nonverbal cues to interact with caregivers. How these cues are read by caregivers is an integral part of the all-important attachment relationship and infant development.

Elisabeth Robson, a Family and Child Therapist who specializes in infant, child, and family treatments, implements "Baby Cues" into her work with parents. "Baby Cues: A Child's First Language" is a child development program designed through NCAST (Nursing Child Assessment Satellite Training) to help parents/caregivers respond and interact more sensitively with their babies. "Baby Cues" is based on research done by nursing professor, Dr. Kathryn Barnard, founder of the Center on Infant Mental Health and Development at the University of Washington.

Robson states that knowing how to read nonverbal cues is essential because "infants, toddlers, and even young children who are developing language, but still cannot express their feelings, needs, or wants the way we as adults can, use nonverbal communication to be understood." Because infants do not have verbal skills, nonverbal cues are all they have to communicate during that early period of their development.

According to Barnard, there are two types of nonverbal cues used by infants and toddlers: engagement and disengagement cues. When a child expresses herself using engagement cues, a parent may find it a good time for talking, teaching, playing, or feeding the child. In other words, the child is willing to interact with the parent. However, when displaying disengagement cues, the child usually tries to communicate a need for a break in whatever they are doing (whether it's eating, playing, or listening).

Each type of cue may be expressed in either a subtle or potent manner. Potent engagement cues include smiling, babbling, and reaching toward caregiver. Subtle engagement cues are more difficult to notice and may include brow raising, eyes wide and bright, facial brightening, and open hands.

Disengagement cues, which are also expressed subtly and potently, occur more frequently. While potent disengagement cues are quite clear and include crawling away, crying, or falling asleep, subtle disengagement cues may provide a greater challenge for caregivers. They are often difficult to detect and include things such as fast breathing, hand behind head, hand to ear, leg kicking, and lip compression. Robson explains, "some of the cues are more subtle and may seem arbitrary and that's why parents sometimes miss them."

In considering the relationship between the cues and parent-child interaction, Robson suggests that

“noticing baby cues is very important for attachment.” It contributes to an environment in which the child feels safe and secure, and also to the development of a realization that they’re being taken care of and being understood. We see that constant failures to read the infants’ cues have direct impact on attachment.

Robson adds that “we all need to disengage from things, and the idea of disengagement is not that they are having a bad experience with what they’re doing, it just means that they need a change or want to do something different.” According to Barnard, since infants can only take in a certain amount of information before needing a break from the interaction, caregivers who allow the infant to pause and then wait until the infant is ready to become engaged again, have longer and more attuned interactions with the infant.

So, what happens to the relationship between parent and child if the parent cannot read disengagement cues? Robson states that when parents repeatedly miss their children’s cues, this may lead to “distress” or “the child may learn that the parent can’t read their cues and they need to try a different strategy. In extreme cases, the child may even give up and stop trying.”

However, Robson notes reassuringly, “kids are very resilient and will try for a very long time to have their needs identified. If it’s a subtle disengagement cue the parent is missing, the child is going to move on to a more potent cue that, hopefully, the parent will pick up on.”

A common reason why parents may miss their infant’s cues is attributed to parental trauma. Robson suggests that a parent who experienced trauma is constantly on the lookout for danger, so their efforts are directed at keeping them and their children safe. That sometimes may get in the way of seeing what’s in front of them, so they miss subtle things with their baby because they’re constantly looking at their environment.

In a study by professors Karen Appleyard (Duke University) and Joy Osofsky (Louisiana State), following trauma, parents may often become overwhelmed by anxiety and experience symptoms of depression. These two factors may greatly affect their

parenting and the connection they form with their children.

Robson believes that an emphasis on nonverbal communication should be an integral part of the therapeutic intervention offered to struggling parents. It is helpful when parents become aware of the positive things that they do and how well they are able read their babies’ cues once they do notice. Robson adds that helping parents develop insight as to what their child might be thinking and feeling, so that they begin to think of their child as a separate person who needs things from them, has provided encouraging results.

Overall, we can remain optimistic about parents’ ability to improve the interaction with their children even when they previously haven’t had that much success in reading non-verbal cues. Since relationships are not static, such difficulties are repairable, especially with young children. Robson states that “if a parent becomes more attuned to what the child needs, it has a positive effect on the relationship, and when that becomes consistent over time, there is a positive effect on attachment.”

—Contributing Writer: Noam Bin-Noon, *The Trauma & Mental Health Report* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/talking-about-trauma/201311/baby-talk-nonverbal-infant-communication>

—Chief Editor: Robert T. Muller, *The Trauma & Mental Health Report* <http://trauma.blog.yorku.ca/>

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