

ARTICLE

Smile Back

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One of the greatest and most joyful feelings is smiling with a baby. This is why so many of us instantly find ourselves wanting to smile and play with a baby at the grocery store. When we smile and play with babies in this way, we are not just having fun, we are meeting a baby's primary developmental need – to experience responsive relationships.

It's not just babies who need these responsive relationships and social smiles, toddlers reap the benefits too. Smiling with babies and toddlers serves many important purposes that have immediate and long-lasting impacts for their development and learning. For example, smiling helps a baby or toddler maintain positive emotions, which is important for [social-emotional development](#).

It is remarkable that babies begin engaging in social smiles between 2 to 3 months of age. At this young age babies are already learning social cues. They begin to express interest in faces and how to get the attention of their caregivers. Babies are developing their emotional communication and learning from their parents and teachers how to respond when interacting with people. This is why an adult caregiver's facial expressions and tone of voice are so important for the development of infants and toddlers. Interacting in these types of social interactions and having the time to play is critical for their developing brains and for the development of their speech and language.

Babies and toddlers look at facial expressions and listen to tone of voice to determine whether it is safe to explore and how they should respond when they meet new people and are in new situations. Parents and other important adult caregivers, such as teachers, are instrumental in supporting these important social and emotional skills for infants and toddlers.

So how do we engage in these social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic? Should parents be concerned about wearing face coverings? Not necessarily. As long as the children this age experience many opportunities for face-to-face time and lots of play when they are at home, they will learn, develop and appreciate all the extra smiles.

- When at home, play peek-a-boo. Then the baby can see how your eyes light up when you smile and can see your smile while you play. Be sure to play peek-a-boo at a slower pace so that the baby has time to notice your facial expression and tone of voice.
- Take extra time for face-to-face interactions where you use different sounds and facial expressions. When making these sounds, wait for the baby to respond. It may take a few seconds. This can become a game of “let’s take turns” where the baby and the adult take turns watching, listening and then responding.
- Play with some bubbles—slowly blowing the bubbles, making sounds and smiling.
- Read to your baby or toddler. Choose a book with different facial expressions and model the faces to your child. Choose books with rhymes and change the tone of your voice when reading. See if your library has these books and ask a librarian for more ideas:
 - Making Faces: A First Book of Emotions by Abrams Appleseed
 - I Love All of Me (Wonderful Me) by Lorie Ann Grover (author) and Carolina Búzio (illustrator). ISBN 9781338286236.
 - Who?: A Celebration of Babies by Robie Harris (author) and Natascha Rosenberg (illustrator)
- Sing together. Babies and toddlers love to sing and hear their parents and teachers sing. Do not worry about the sound of your voice. Just have fun and be playful. Singing offers many benefits and supports young children’s learning speech and language. You can make up new words to familiar tunes, such as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

So when you are at home, take time to put away your phone and be present for lots of play and those important face-to-face interactions. Then when your baby or toddler smiles at you, there are no distractions and you will be ready to smile back.



Helping kids grow healthier brains.

[123connectwithme.org](https://www.zerotothree.org)

Link:

Social-emotional development =

<https://www.zerotothree.org/espanol/social-and-emotional-development>