

TINY BITS (BETTER INFORMED TOGETHER) FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/A/DP
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HELPING YOUR CHILD BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Through relationships, children discover who they are and learn to understand others. Learn how you can help your child develop strong relationships with the people in their lives. Babies are born with a drive to relate to and connect with others, and they continue to develop the social skills necessary to form strong, healthy relationships throughout their lives:

- A 6-month-old laughs and laughs as his father holds a napkin over his face, and then drops it to say, “Peek-a-boo!” Whenever his father tries to put the napkin back on the table, the baby says, “eh, eh, eh” to let his father know he wants him will hold up that silly napkin again. This baby is learning that he can connect with a loved one through a fun activity like this one.
- A 20-month-old wants to cut his own fruit for snack. His grandmother says no. He stamps his feet and sobs. His grandmother tells him she has an idea: She gives him a dull butter knife and guides his hand to help him cut some melon. This toddler is learning that his interests and needs are important and what it feels like to be understood by another person.
- A 2 ½-year-old sees her brother fall off his bicycle and begin crying. She runs over and starts to rub his back, like she’s seen her mommy do. This toddler is learning how to empathize with, or understand, another’s feelings and experiences.

Below are some ideas for nurturing relationship-building skills in infants and toddlers.

1. **Allow for unstructured time with your child each day.** Let them be the leader in deciding what to play. Do not multi-task during this special playtime—just be there with your child one-on-one. They will feel loved and special with your full attention.
2. **Let your child know you are interested in their activities.** Show a sincere interest in your child—whatever they are doing. Your attention is what they desire and are thrilled to receive. You can show your interest by commenting on or describing what they are doing: “You are using so many beautiful colors to make that drawing.”
3. **Encourage children to express feelings in age-appropriate ways.** Forming positive, healthy relationships depends on the ability to show feelings appropriately and to recognize the feelings of others. Teach children acceptable ways to vent anger, like drawing an angry picture, running in the yard, or tossing a pillow on the floor. Label your own feelings, “I am happy because you helped me clean up,” or, “I am sad that Grandma had to fly home.”
4. **Respect your child’s feelings.** This teaches your child to trust their instincts. It can also help them work through powerful or difficult feelings and allow them to move on. Knowing you respect their feelings teaches your child empathy and respect for others, which are important elements in any relationship.
5. **Provide opportunities for your child to develop relationships with peers.** Children need practice to learn to share, take turns, resolve conflict, and feel the joy of friendship. Playing together gives children all of this—plus a chance for parents to connect with other adults, too! At this age, being present during playdates is important as children often need help learning and practicing their new friendship skills.

Excerpt from: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/227-tips-on-helping-your-child-build-relationships>

