

# Building “Piece” of Mind

## The 9mo Visit: Emotions are the First Language

Infants are happier and healthier when they feel safe and connected. The way you and others interact with your infant influences the many new connections that are forming within the infant’s brain. These early brain connections are the basis for more complicated skills and behaviors, and they will affect the learning, behavior and health of your infant for many years to come. Early, supportive relationships build your infant’s brain and prepare it for the future.

By the time infants are 9 months old, they are able to read facial expressions. A healthy fear of strangers is common at this age. It is called “stranger anxiety.” Social referencing is also common. When a stranger approaches, your infant will often look to you for clues. “Is this new face a friend or an enemy?” If you seem comfortable with the stranger, your child will often relax as well. If you look uncomfortable, your child will make it very clear that this new person is not welcome!

This social referencing behavior shows that your infant is very sensitive to your emotions. This can be very reassuring for your infant. If you knowingly smile at your infant and use soothing language, you are giving your infant clear signals that everything is fine. Giving these clear signals helps to soothe and calm your infant. On the other hand, if you frequently forget that your infant is watching your emotions, it can be confusing and stressful for your infant. If you are too stressed or depressed to smile at your infant, or too upset to use soothing language, your infant may also become stressed, depressed or upset.

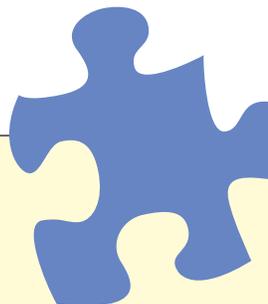
Because your child is so sensitive to your moods, you should not try to hide your emotions. Attempts to hide your emotions may be only partly successful and end up confusing your infant. That said, you should always try to soften strong emotions. Think about how your emotions affect your child’s emotions and actions. Are you showing unhealthy ways of dealing with strong emotions? Examples of these are yelling, withdrawing, or becoming angry or violent. Or, are you

showing healthy, flexible ways of dealing with strong emotions? Examples of these are choosing your words carefully, calming yourself by walking away, or agreeing to talk with others about a conflict at another time—after you have had a chance to think about it and the child is not listening into your discussion.

Emotions are the first language your infant knows. You need to be aware of what you are “saying” every day. Infants and children believe that the world revolves around them (egocentrism). If you are angry at your boss or your spouse, your infant or child will likely sense that you are angry. However, they may think that you are angry with them instead!

*It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.*

~Frederick Douglass



# An Introduction to Purposeful Parenting

Purposeful Parenting begins by thinking about the final result. What do parents want for their children? All parents want their adult children to be healthy, happy and successful. They want them to be all that they can be. Happily, most children want this too! Students of human development have noticed that children are born with a strong need to master new skills and to be challenged. Even children with disabilities! But before children act on these advanced needs (like the need to understand, to be creative, and to be productive), more basic needs must be met. Bodily needs, like breathing, water, food and sleep, are the most basic. Next is the need for safety. Children also need to feel loved and a sense of belonging with family and friends. Children then start to build self-esteem, as the need to grow confidence through contribution and accomplishment is natural. This confidence then leads to the need to be independent and to define for oneself what it means to be healthy, happy, and successful.

Recent research says that bodily needs, the need to feel safe, the need to be loved, the need to feel competent, and the need to be self-directed, are universal. Meeting these needs allows more children to be healthy and successful in school, no matter what their socio-economic or racial/ethnic background is. Unmet needs, though, can cause stress. If brief, stress can be positive and provide a source of motivation. However, too much stress can be toxic, messing up the basic growth and functioning of the brain. The six elements of Purposeful Parenting build on this research. By being Purposeful, Protective, Personal, Progressive, Positive and Playful, parents and caregivers will lessen toxic stress and encourage developing children to be all that they can be.

## **Purposeful**

- Think about the long-term goals of parenting and try to nurture the basic skills that children need to be successful. These include language, social skills, and self-control (also known as emotional regulation).
- Remember that the word discipline means “to teach.” It does NOT mean to control or to stop bad behaviors.
- Determine the “purpose” of infant and child behaviors. Many repeated behaviors are used to meet one of the basic needs mentioned above. For example, repeated behaviors may be the child’s way of trying to say “I’m tired,” “I’m scared,” “I want some attention,” “I need to prove that I can do this,” or “I have an idea or plan.”
- Assist children in learning new, more desirable behaviors or skills to meet their needs and goals.

## **Protective**

- Be sure that infants and children have their bodily needs met. These include food, water, shelter and sleep.
- Be sure that infants and children feel safe.
- Prevent toxic stress by always meeting these basic (bodily and safety) needs.
- But avoid being overly protective or “hovering,” so children will eventually feel capable and safe on their own.

## **Personal**

- Be sure that infants and children feel loved and accepted. Strong relationships decrease toxic stress.
- Be kind and gentle. Being mean, harsh or violent may hurt the relationship and create toxic stress.
- Avoid calling your child names like bad or good, dumb or smart, mean or nice. Naming emotions and behaviors may help with the learning process (like “you look mad” or “hitting is not helpful”), but always love the child unconditionally.

- Help children in learning more helpful or adaptive behaviors instead of just saying “stop it” or “no!”
- Match your way of teaching to your child’s particular needs and strengths. It may take more planning and effort, but your teaching will work better if it is more personal.

## **Progressive**

- Understand that infant and child development is always changing. Discipline and parenting skills need to change, too.
- Have reasonable expectations for your child’s development. Unreasonable expectations create frustration and stress.
- Notice and encourage basic behaviors and skills as they appear (“Thanks for using your words” or “Good job sharing”).
- Remember that it is easier to TEACH the behaviors we WANT, than to PREVENT unwanted behaviors!

## **Be Positive ...**

- In regard. Love your child, not the behavior. Avoid corporal punishments like spanking. They are less effective with time, increase stress, and teach children that adults respond to conflict or strong emotions with violence.
- In outlook. Optimism decreases stress and anxiety. Use affirmations like “I know you can do better the next time.”
- In reward. “Catch your child being good” to strengthen positive, adaptive behaviors. Rewarding effort and steps in the right direction are more important than demanding complete success.

## **Playful**

- Remain playful. Play time lets you teach everything mentioned above. Reading together is a good example. Ask your pediatrician about Reach Out and Read.
- Be engaging and interactive. Allow your child to be creative and to direct the play.