

SPARKle When You Interact with Young Children!

When you “tune in” and respond to a young child in ways that are **Sensitive**, **Prompt**, and **Appropriate**, you **SPARK** advancement in many areas of his development

Imagine that you’re a star. Actually, imagine that you’re two kinds of stars—both the kind who’s the focus of red-carpet attention at movie premieres and the “twinkle, twinkle” kind of star, the star that brightens the night sky, comforting and inspiring with its presence and light.

As someone who interacts with young children—a mom or dad, an uncle or grandmother—you *are* a star in both senses. You play a starring role in the lives of the little ones in your care. Being a parent or caregiver is surely one, if not *the* most important of the many roles in your life. And it’s the role in which you really want to shine with every bit of your star power.

Research tells us that adult caregivers can prompt and strengthen the development of young children’s minds, social skills, and emotions when they remember to do what stars do best—sparkle! That is, to respond to the young child in ways that share three vital characteristics (which also happen to start with the first three letters of the word “sparkle”): **Sensitivity**, **Promptness**, and **Appropriateness**. Here’s how:

1 Be Sensitive

A sensitive caregiver is an *aware* caregiver. She tunes in to a child’s behavior, taking time to notice and try to understand what a baby or very young child wants to “say” with movements or sounds, with facial expressions or gestures.

Children find all sorts of ways to express their

wants, their interests, and their pleasures without ever speaking a word. The sensitive caregiver notices these cries, hums, kicks, reaches, frowns, chuckles, squeals and gurgles and begins to understand them as clearly as speech.

Learning to be sensitive, to tune in to what a baby or young child’s behavior is telling us, really isn’t complicated. Sensitivity to a young child is simply a matter of watching what the child is doing coupled with a dash of common sense and a desire to understand.



Young children are the winners when interaction is sensitive, prompt, and appropriate.

2 Be Prompt

Another easy one: respond to the child *right away*. A prompt response is one that follows the child’s behavior as quickly as possible. A caregiver’s promptness is reassuring and rewarding because it lets the child know right away that his message and meaning were heard and understood.

3 Be Appropriate

Finally, a responsive caregiver is *appropriate*. She shapes her interaction by matching the young child’s behavior as closely as possible in terms of features like the loudness or softness of her voice, the level of emotion in her expression, and the kinds of gestures she makes. Seeing her toddler son enthusiastically beating a soup pot with a wooden spoon, she joins in with equal gusto on the dish pan, mirroring his smiling face and, perhaps, commenting on their fun, “We sure like making loud music!” A child is comfortable with a caregiver’s appropriate response because it matches what he’s doing right now.

More opportunities...

Cultivate Awareness

No mom or dad can be expected to attend fully to their baby or young child's feelings and actions every moment of the day. Those of us who are parents know it's an impossibility—the myth of the Super Parent. What *is* possible for a real-life parent or caregiver is to make an effort, at every realistic opportunity throughout the day, to focus both on the child and on the quality of our interactions with him.

You might get started by choosing everyday routines like mealtimes, diaper changes, dressing, bathing, or outdoor play—times when you're naturally present with your child—as the best times to sharpen your focus. Think about **SP**arkle, being **S**ensitive, **P**rompt, and **A**ppropriate in how you respond to your little one.

While seated in his high chair at breakfast, for example, young Nathan might start batting his hand at the spoon you're trying to guide toward his mouth. What's that all about? Time to be Sensitive. Try to “read” his message. Is he saying, “This mashed banana tastes awful and I'm finished!” or is he saying, “Handling that spoon looks like fun. I'm feeling like a big boy and I'm ready to do the spooning around here myself!” Put all the signs together, including any of his other behaviors and other information about the situation, then take your best guess and go with it. In other words, be **P**rompt with your response.

“Hey, Nate,” you might say, “Looks like you want to hold the spoon!” Quickly place the spoon in his small fist and explain what you're doing. Then think: **A**ppropriate. Try to match your involvement in the exchange to Nathan's enthusiasm for it. In other words, share his level of excitement and interest in the new activity. “Here's the spoon! What a big boy ... you're learning to feed yourself. Yum!” And so it goes.

Expect that there will be many times when your detective skills fail you, when you're trying your best to be sensitive to baby Martha's signals and your best guess turns out to be dead wrong. When you thought her frantic rocking back and forth meant she wanted help to get up and dance to the music soaring from the radio, and all along she was trying to say, “This racket



is hurting my ears! Stop it!” Her shower of tears when you try to help her dance will alert you to the mistake. It's okay. You'll figure it out and make amends... **P**romptly!

The good news is that the more you practice sensitive, prompt, and appropriate interactions with your child, the more this sort of interaction will become second nature for both of you. Soon, you'll simply discover that you're more fully “tuned in” more and more of the of the time. And when you are, you and your child are both winners. Strengthened development and healthy adult-child bonds are your rewards!

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