

BABIES LOVE FACES

Speaking for the Baby x SMS4dads Campaign

Babies are keen to interact with you and get to know you from Day 1. Babies really like to look at faces. In fact, they would rather look at faces than look at a toy and this increases over the first 12-months.

Minutes after birth, a baby can focus on a face and they can imitate your expression – amazing! They muster a lot of effort to do this. When they see you poke out your tongue or smile, they will try to do the same. Mirror neurons fire in their brain both when they see you performing that action and when they give it a go themselves. Lots of brain activity going on!

Give your baby plenty of opportunity to look at your face as you bathe them or change them or play with them. They will especially be looking in your eyes and watching your mouth move – they just love it!

I learn about emotions from you, Dad

Look at you!



From my first day out in the world,
I look to your face to learn about
emotions Dad.

Oh bub, it's
ok, I'm here



Help me learn about emotions, Dad

Babies study the expressions on people's faces. This is how they learn about emotions and feelings. Seeing your face when you copy what they are showing on their face helps them learn about what emotions both feel like and look like. When you show on your face how baby feels, it helps them to figure out what is happening to them. When they are upset, and you look back at them with a face that shows you can see they are upset and you speak with them gently and with kindness, you let them know you understand how they are feeling. Having a parent show that they care can be soothing for babies, even if they don't fully stop crying.

Let's look at each other, Dad

Mutual gaze – looking at each other front on so your eyes meet – is a powerful way to 'hold' each other and communicate. Mutual gaze is often intense during feeding and when you are on the same level chatting together. It's a powerful bonding experience and part of the emerging 'love affair' between the two of you.

For a baby keeping up with this intense focus is hard work and they will need to take a break. When they look away it's not because they are bored of you, or don't like you. And it's not because they need a more exciting game or you to speak more loudly. When they turn their head away it is usually because they are getting tired and need a break from the intensity of it. If you see this happening take a pause yourself and wait patiently until they look back.

At times that they don't look back or seem not to be enjoying it anymore, you can help keep them in a calm state by changing activity.

Not everyone feels comfortable with prolonged eye contact, especially the intensity of mutual gaze. This is evident in some neurodivergent people, especially autistics. Communication between autistic parents and/or babies can look different from neurotypical communication, not worse, just different. Eye contact is only beneficial if it feels comfortable and connecting for both you and your baby. There are other ways to communicate and feel connected. Over time, you will discover what feels best for both of you.

*Written by A/Prof Richard Fletcher and Dr Bronwyn Leigh
for SMS4dads and the Centre for Perinatal Psychology.*

Illustrations by Jess Racklyeft for the Speaking for the Baby Campaign.

