



BABY DEVELOPMENT

Strategies to socialize your baby

Encouraging your baby to interact with others isn't just for fun—it's an important developmental tool.

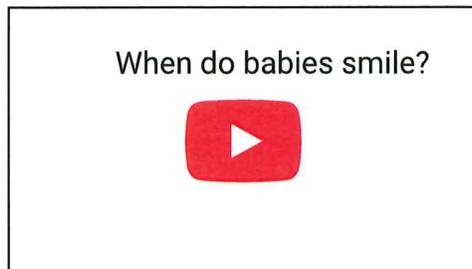
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The first time my son, Rory, now 15 months, showed interest in other babies was when he was about four months old. We were hosting a **playdate** and he reached over to my friend's daughter, grabbed her arm and they flapped and smiled and gurgled. Apart from being adorable, it clued me in to the fact that I wasn't the only one who needed a social life.

For many new parents, the draw to “socialize” our babies initially comes from our own need to get out and see people. But these types of get-togethers—whether a casual playdate, organized baby group, mom-and-baby class or a trip to the playground—actually have an important role in healthy **child development**. According to Corina John, an early childhood educator and lead family support worker at an Ontario Early Years Centre in Toronto, interacting with others at a very young age builds social skills and confidence.



As parents, we naturally socialize our babies from birth in the way we engage with them: “Face-to-face interactions and conversations with newborns help them learn the different sounds of people’s voices and how they express emotions,” says John. “Making eye contact, smiling, talking and singing to them and playing copycat help them get a sense of turn-taking.” Experts also believe that infant socialization is the foundation of communication, encouraging healthy language development and even

Hospital for Sick Children, learning language happens through repeated social interaction and exposure to lots of conversation.

Starting at about three or four months, babies are ready to broaden their horizons to larger, organized groups. “Babies feel safe to explore the world—new environments filled with new adults and other infants and children—when supported by a parent or caregiver,” says John.

When it comes to choosing the amount of mingling and the setting for infant socialization, say a playdate versus a group or class, John believes variety is key. “Exposing our children to different environments helps us to better understand their natural temperaments and needs and how we can best support them.” According to John, “a casual gathering is about functioning within a small group, where the conversations are usually more quiet and intimate; whereas, a structured class is about lots of activity with many sights, smells and sounds to take in.”

First-time mom Ruth Alves, an art director in Toronto, has seen positive benefits from socializing her now-nine-month-old daughter, Emilia, in both her confidence and engagement. “The first time I took her to music circle, I couldn’t believe how much she laughed. It was amazing to see how engaged she was with everything going on around her. It was a great reminder of how important it is for her to be exposed to different things.” Because Emilia was born three months prematurely, Alves eased her into social situations. “At about seven months old, I started to feel confident about taking her into settings with other babies.” Now Alves and Emilia also go to swim class and mom-and-baby yoga. “It’s great for her to spend time with babies her age.”

The good news is that infant socialization is something we already do as we go about our day interacting with our baby and other people in our environment. “You don’t have to be at a play group or structured play space every single day in order for your baby to develop social skills,” says John. “Facing your baby outward in a carrier when he is a bit older or while having conversations with others also provides the opportunity for them see and sense the world around them.”

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