

# Observing and *Knowing Your Child*

birth to  
6 months



## In a nutshell

- Observation, or watching, your baby from the very start of his life is one way to get to know him.
- Through your observations, you will learn your baby's likes, dislikes and personality.
- Understanding the different areas of development is a way to know what to expect as your baby grows.

## About Observing and Knowing Your Child

Your baby is a special, unique human being. Your baby started to show you his personality even before he was born! You can get to know your baby from the very start of his life by observing, or watching him. Observing doesn't take any special equipment or training. It is one of the most helpful and enjoyable activities new parents can do. It starts with counting those little fingers and toes when you first lay eyes on your child! When you are puzzled or concerned about something your baby is doing, take a step back and just observe for awhile. Your baby will most often be the one to give you answers to your questions.

Observing your child is one way for you to know your child. You are becoming the expert on your child! Getting to know this unique little person will help you respond to her. When you learn the cues your baby gives you, you can meet her needs. When you meet your baby's needs, she learns to trust you. She learns that the world is a good place to be. You and your baby can develop a strong loving relationship that will last a lifetime. It all starts with observation.

Knowing the different stages of child development is a way to learn what to expect as your child grows. Think about the different skill areas. Learn about how a baby's skills develop in Language, Intellectual, Social-Emotional and Motor.





## Observing and Knowing Your Child How-to's

### Birth to 6 Months

- Observation can be informal. Take time to watch your baby as she eats, sleeps and plays. Make some mental notes about what you see her do. You'll soon see changes in the sounds she makes, the way she notices her surroundings, and the way she holds and moves her body.
- Formal observation means you keep notes or use a checklist. For example, you may want to keep track of the times and how many minutes he nurses. Review your notes often to see patterns and note changes.
- Watch the cues your baby gives you. Babies communicate through eye contact, facial expressions, body positioning, and by using their voice. When you observe your baby, you begin to see patterns in her behavior.
- A crying baby can be very upsetting. As a parent you want to make him feel better right away. But if you are calm, your baby will have an easier time calming down. Take a few deep breaths and observe your baby to see what the problem is.
- Learn about what you can expect your child to do at different ages. There are many reliable web sites that offer information to parents on many topics, including milestones in development:
  - The American Academy of Pediatrics — [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
  - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) — [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
  - ParentLink — <http://extension.missouri.edu/parentlink>
- Contact Parents as Teachers at [www.ParentsAsTeachers.org](http://www.ParentsAsTeachers.org) for information on how young children develop. When you know what to expect, you will be a better observer of your child.

# Observing and Knowing Your Child

6 to 12 months



## In a nutshell

- Your baby is on the move, and you will be observing on the go!
- You will learn many things from observing your child.
- Children develop favorites very early in life.

## About Observing and Knowing Your Child

If your baby hasn't started to move around yet, get ready! She will soon be rolling, scooting, creeping, crawling and walking. Have you left your baby in one place on the floor for just a few minutes, only to return and find her across the room? If your baby is on the move, you will be observing on the go! The basics of observing are the same:

- Learn about the ages and stages of child development so you know what to expect.
- Pick a time or a behavior to keep track of.
- Watch her informally or write observations down.

When you watch your child move around the house you will learn what challenges her. You will learn how your child is learning to handle frustration. You also need to look at the environment now. Look for things that might need to be changed. For example, if your child keeps crawling to the low shelf that holds your collection of DVDs, you may decide to move them out of her reach. You can change the environment to support your child's developmental needs.

When you observe your child you will learn many things that will help you make decisions as a parent. You can better understand why he acts the way he does. It is easier to be patient when you understand why your child does something. Your child is a unique little person. Observing helps you know how he expresses his needs and desires. It will also help you understand how your child relates to others, both peers and other adults.

You have probably noticed that your child has some likes and dislikes. Children develop favorites very early in life. Maybe it's a certain story at bedtime or the playground that excites her. Your child's favorites will be apparent to you when you observe her play and daily routines. Young children want to repeat a favorite activity over and over. You may think you can't read that favorite book one more time, but to your child it's a familiar old friend. Soon you will see your child's favorites change, and those early preferences will be precious memories. As long as her choices are healthy ones, let your child enjoy her favorites as long and as often as she wants.



## Observing and Knowing Your Child How-to's 6 to 12 Months

- Get down on your child's level and look around his environment. You will get a different view of what needs to be changed to keep him safe.
  - Observe how your child responds to different settings. You may find she is more comfortable in familiar surroundings or adventurous when she is in new places.
  - Observe how your baby relates to other people. This might be a big change at this time in his life. Around the age of 8 or 9 months, babies become more aware of adults who are not their caregivers. Your baby may seem fearful, cry and cling to you with people they see somewhat frequently. This is typical and shows your baby knows he can trust you. The 6-month-old who willingly went into his uncle's arms may become a 10-month-old who looks wary and turns to his parent. Offer your child security and be patient. Don't require that he go to someone he doesn't trust.
  - Consider keeping a notebook of observations to share with your baby's child care provider. Each day, record observations made during the time he is with you. Ask your care provider to do the same. You might want to develop a recording sheet that asks for the same information each day. Blank paper will also work. Make sure to include the date of the observation.
  - Keep up with your mobile child. Spend some time each day observing your child as she moves from place to place. Watch how she interacts with her environment.
  - Keep a list of your child's favorite things:
    - the words he understands, and those he says
    - what he uses to help him calm down
    - what he likes and does not like to eat
    - a favorite baby game
    - a song that's sure to bring on sleep
- You will be glad you observed your child's favorite things at each age.

# Observing and Knowing Your Child

12 - 24 months



## In a nutshell

- Observation will help to understand what triggers misbehavior.
- Your child will learn from the goals you set.
- Respond to your child in ways she can understand.

## About Observing and Knowing Your Child

Every parent wants the best for their child, and every parent wants the best from their child. Parents want their child to listen to them, respect the rules they set up, and show good behavior. Sometimes what may seem like bad behavior may be understandable when you observe the whole situation. For example, taking an active toddler to a restaurant and expecting him to sit quietly may result in a crabby, fussy child. Picnicking in the park for dinner may be more suitable for this child. Watch your child to learn his cues. You will be able to tell when he is over stimulated or not able to meet the demands of the situation.

Your child must learn from you, her first teacher, what behavior is appropriate in different places. Can you imagine how difficult that is for a toddler to figure out? It's okay to run and shout in the park but not in the grocery store. Daddy wants you to get up in the morning, but stay in your bed at night. Toddlers do a lot of testing to learn how to behave. Learning about stages of development can help you set goals for your child to learn how to be-

have. First, think about how you would like your child to behave in the future. This is the goal you would like your child to achieve. Then observe what she actually does in different places. Finally, develop a plan to reach the goals you've set based on your child's individual temperament and stage of development. Continuing to observe your child's progress will help you decide how well your plan of action is working.

Your toddler is just learning to understand and speak language. He won't understand long speeches or verbal directions with many steps. Since your child isn't talking much, you can understand what he is thinking and feeling by observing him. Observation can be thought of as listening with all your senses. Watch your child. Look at his body language. Listen to not only his speech but other sounds he makes like sighs, grunts or cries. Use gentle touch to calm and direct him. Respond to your child with words, facial expressions, touch and body language to assure him you are trying to get his message.



## Observing and Knowing Your Child How-to's

### 12 to 24 Months

- Learn how children develop so you will understand how you might expect your child to behave. It's easy to have unrealistic expectations if you don't know how toddlers typically behave.
- Spend time each day observing your child from a distance. Quietly watch her at play. When she approaches you, don't ignore her, but keep interaction to a minimum so she will return to what she was doing.
- Try to be objective. If you are recording your observations, write exactly what you see. It might be hard not to put a judgment on what your child does, but you will learn the most if you remain objective.
- When you observe, give your child time to demonstrate his behavior. Unless he is really in danger, don't rescue him. Allow him time to solve his problems himself. Support him by telling him you know he can do it.
- Think about what you have seen your child do. You may be surprised at how many things your child is capable of doing.



# Observing and Knowing Your Child

24 - 36 months



## In a nutshell

- Knowing your child's personal style, or temperament, will help you set up routines for him that fit his natural rhythms.
- Observe your child to provide child-centered learning.
- Parents play important roles in nurturing their child's development.

## About Observing and Knowing Your Child

Young children need routines. It is true that some children adapt to routines easier than others. Observing your child and knowing his temperament will help you set up routines that fit his natural rhythms. Two-year-olds are just beginning to experience the world outside their family. Knowing what to expect can make the world more predictable. Routines allow your child to organize his thoughts and experiences. When he knows what to expect, your child is more likely to behave the way you want him to.

Your child learns more easily when she is interested in what she's doing. Observe your child while she is playing. Play is your child's way of learning many things. When you watch your child play, you find out her interests, her activity level, and her levels of understanding and problem solving. You can then introduce her to activities that fit her personal style. For example, if you know your child really likes playing with toy animals, choose books about pets to keep her interest. Show her how to sort

her pet toys into groups, perhaps those that are large versus those that are small. Pretend with her and her pets. When you focus on your child, you can be sure that her learning is child-centered.

You play an important role in nurturing your child's development. You are the designer of your child's environment. You can observe how he interacts with the world around him. You provide toys and learning experiences based on what you observe about your child's interests and learning style. You are also the person your child can go to learn about his world. Through observation, you will know just when to provide help or to give him time to work things out on his own. When you have confidence in your child, he will gain confidence in himself. You are also the final authority for your child. You set limits to keep him safe and to provide for his health and well-being. You are also his advocate. Your observations are important to your child's healthy development.



## Observing and Knowing Your Child How-to's

### 24 to 36 Months

- Observe your child's personal style when it comes to routines. Does he fall asleep and wake up easily at about the same time? Can you predict when he'll need a snack, or do you have to rely on signs that he's hungry? Some children's bodies are very regular; others don't seem to have much of an internal clock. When you establish routines for your child, build on his natural rhythms if you can.
- When creating a routine, stick with it. Some children take to routines easily and rely on them being the same from time to time. With others, parents have to try harder and longer to help their child get into a routine. The child who has more difficulty following a routine may be the child who needs it most. Children need routines. They help them feel safe.
- Two-year-olds need the predictability of routines. They also need a few, consistent rules. Your two-year-old is developing self control. Routines can help her know what to expect. Knowing what to expect can help her control her behavior.
- Be your child's play partner. Observe her interests and see what she is learning. Follow your child's lead as she plays. Be a partner who can give her hints, guidance and encouragement when she's working out a problem. You'll soon learn when to help and when to let her work it out herself.
- Have confidence in your child's ability to guide his own learning. Let him know you trust in his abilities.
- Give your child only as much help as she needs to move to the next step in developing a skill. Let her determine the timing of her learning.
- Give your child your attention often. Provide experiences that support his learning. Field trips are great for this. You don't have to take your child to expensive places to have a field trip experience. Take your child to the grocery store and talk about the foods you eat. When you include your child in your daily activities you are his consultant on the world.



# Observing and Knowing Your Child

young preschooler



## In a nutshell

- As your child grows, your expectations for her behavior need to change too.
- You can use observation to help you model behaviors for your child.
- Early friendships are important.

## About Observing and Knowing Your Child

Leaving the toddler years is a big milestone for you and your child. Have you noticed how much your child has changed from just a few months ago? As your child grows, your expectations for his behavior need to change too. Observing your child helps you have realistic expectations. Your child is physically bigger and more capable. He can understand you and tell you a lot using his growing language skills. But he is still a very young child. He needs your patience, understanding and support to help him as he learns to control his behavior. When you carefully observe him, you will be able to see what your child can do and where he is still learning.

Young children are good observers too. They learn by observing their parents and others around them. Model behaviors you would like to see in your child. For example, if you would like your child to remove his dinner dishes from the table and carry them to the kitchen, do so with yours. You might say something like, "In our family, we each take our dishes to the sink

after dinner." Children are natural imitators. When you see your child doing what you do, tell her. You don't need to give lavish praise or rewards. Just say what you see and express thanks, "You took your dishes to the kitchen! Thank you."

The first true friendships start to show up in the preschool years. There are many reasons to observe this new phase in your child's social-emotional development. Early friendships are important. They provide opportunities for your child to learn to get along with children the same age. There is true affection between young friends, forming foundations for future relationships. As children interact and play together they learn to negotiate and to solve problems. This may not always be smooth. Don't intervene too quickly in your child's struggles. Let your child experience the challenges, as well as the joys, of getting along with his friends. He is learning social skills that will be important for his success in school.



## Observing and Knowing Your Child How-to's Young Preschooler

- Try to observe your child without him knowing. If you are working near by, keep one ear tuned to what your child is doing and saying. Sit or stand out of the way and just watch or record what your child does.
- Be open and receptive to whatever your child is showing you. Try not to interrupt your child to correct him or add to his play. If he approaches you and engages you, you can decide whether or not to join him in play, or divert him back to what he was doing.
- Be objective. Concentrate on what you see, not on placing a value judgment on your child's behavior. Practice saying exactly what you see so you can reflect your child's behavior to him. For example, if he is becoming frustrated because his blocks keep falling down, you could say, "I see you are working hard to build that tower." Your child is learning how to problem solve.
- Concentrate on the behaviors you want to observe. For example, you might want to better understand how your child uses language. So you would focus on the words she uses and understands.
- Note your inner responses to what you see. Observing can teach you a lot about yourself too.
- Be a positive model for your child. When you want to teach your child something new, think how you can model it. Use few words. Children learn best by imitating those who care for them.
- Don't worry about being a perfect model. Your child will learn a lot by understanding that you sometimes make mistakes that you need to correct. And that you have to control your temper to solve problems.
- Provide chances for your child to form friendships. Arrange play dates with other children. Let your child take the lead in deciding who to invite. Just like adults, children hit it off better with some peers than with others. Make sure there are toys and activities available so everyone has a chance to play. Observe your child and his friend from close by. Give children a chance to work things out for themselves, but support them if they are just learning how to play together.

# Observing and *Knowing Your Child*

older preschooler



## In a nutshell

- Watching and listening will help you communicate with your child.
- Observe to guide your child's behavior.
- Make respect a part of family life.

## About Observing and Knowing Your Child

Observation helps you communicate with your child. When you watch her play and listen to her talk (sometimes with herself or with imaginary friends), you may learn how she thinks. Young children are very concrete in their thinking. They interpret the world around them just as they see it. They learn about things by experiencing them. By observing your child, you can tell if what you are trying to say has been heard and understood as you intended. Clear and accurate communication is essential to parenting positively.

Observing your child will help you guide his behavior. Discipline means teaching, not punishment. When you watch your child, you can decide what you need to teach him. Knowing what leads up to a problem behavior will also

help you decide what to do. An important job of parenting is to teach your child ways to develop self-control and foster positive relationships. Parent positively, without angry feelings, physical punishment or shame. Natural or logical consequences are often the tools to help shape behavior. You are the authority in your child's life. You can do this while still being respectful to your child.

In order to learn to respect others, your child must be respected by the adults in her life. One way to respect your child is to know her personality and likes and dislikes. Observe your child to learn these things about her. You are then ready to relate to your child with warmth and tenderness. Children learn by watching adults.





## Observing and Knowing Your Child How-to's Older Preschooler

- Questions are an important part of communication. When you ask questions that are clear, your child is better able to respond. Ask real questions that have answers your child can give back to you.
- Children can be confused by a lot of questions at one time. Ask one question and give your child enough time answer. Young children are still developing their language skills. It may take your child longer to respond than it would an adult.
- Listening is a type of observation. You can learn a lot from listening to your child's developing speech. Young children love to practice their new words. (You may wonder why you were so anxious for your child to talk!) Be an active listener when your child talks to you. Show you are paying attention by using body language. Turn your body in his direction. Focus on your child's face. Repeat something your child has said to encourage her to continue and to check the reality of what she is telling you. Show your child you have received her message by responding.
- Accept that your child may not like a situation, or have feelings that differ from yours. That is ok. Set limits and stick to them, but acknowledge the way that he feels. When you state what you think your child feels based on your observations, you help your child get past his feelings and think about his behavior. Give your child the chance to disagree with the feelings you identify. He may be feeling something different. You have shown him that you are respecting his feelings.
- It is always okay to feel something, but it is not always acceptable to act on those feelings. This is true for both children and adults. As parents we too have many feelings such as love, frustration, confusion, empowerment, anger, etc. Act on positive feelings, but don't ignore those that are not positive. Find healthy ways to deal with stress and anger. Strong feelings—yours and your child's—won't go away if ignored. Be a model for your child. Acknowledge and deal with your feelings.