



Reading Children's Cues

Children experience the same range of emotions as adults, and their communications have meaning. Very often these communications can be subtle especially for children who are young or have complex needs. It may be a challenge to understand what children are trying to tell us. Children may give us clues (cues) in a variety of ways that involve facial expressions, eye contact, turning away, and hand or body movements. The following is a list of possible ways that children may be trying to engage or disengage with others. Practitioners may need to use this list or other resources to teach parents how to recognize and interpret the child's cues.

Engagement Cues

- Babbling
- Brow raising
- Eyes wide and bright
- Face gaze
- Facial brightening
- Feeding sounds
- Feeding posture
- Giggling
- Hands open, fingers slightly flexed
- Head raising
- Hunger posture
- Immobility
- Mutual Gaze/Smiling
- Reaching towards caregiver
- Smooth cyclic movements
- Talking
- Turning head toward caregiver

Disengagement Cues

- Arms straightened along side
- Back arching
- Cling posture
- Choking
- Clenched fists
- Coughing
- Crawling/walking away
- Crying/cry face
- Diffuse body movement
- Dull-looking face/eyes
- Eyes blink/clinched
- Facial grimace
- Fast breathing
- Finger extension
- Frown, brow lowering
- Fussing
- Gaze aversion
- Hand-behind-head
- Hand-to-back-of-neck
- Hand-to-ear
- Hand-to-mouth
- Hand-to-stomach
- Halt hand
- Head lowering
- Hiccups
- Join hands
- Hunger posture
- Immobility
- Increase in sucking noise/movements
- Lateral-head shake
- Leg kicking or straightened with tension
- Lip compression
- Lip grimace
- Looking away
- Maximal lateral gaze aversion
- Overhand beating movement of arms
- Pale/red skin
- Pout
- Pucker face
- Pulling/pushing away
- Rapid wrist rotation
- Saying "no"
- Self-clasp
- Shoulder "shrug"
- Spitting/spitting up
- Tongue show
- Tray pounding
- Turning head
- Ugh face
- Vomiting
- Walking away
- Whimpers
- Wing palm
- Withdraw from alert to sleep state
- Wrinkled forehead
- Yawn
- Increased foot movement
- Join hands

References

Excerpted from: Oxford, M. L., & Findlay, D. M. (Eds.). (2013). *NCAST caregiver/parent-child interaction teaching manual* (2nd ed.). Seattle, WA: NCAST Programs, University of Washington, School of Nursing.

To read more on reading children's cues go to:

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (n.d.). *Understanding your child's behavior: Reading your child's cues from birth to age 2* [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/reading_cues.pdf