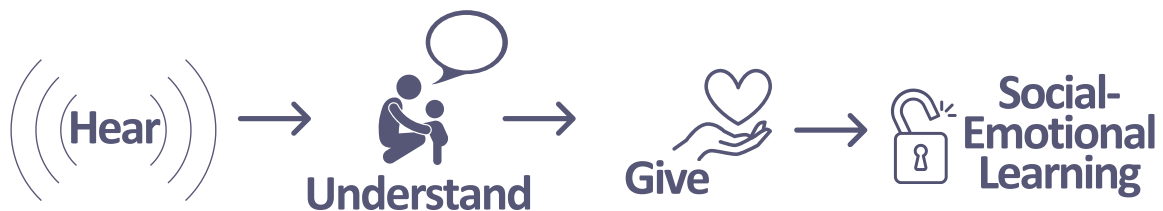




For Caregivers



# Responsive Caregiver Strategies



© 2020, 2025. Family, Infant and Preschool Program

All rights reserved.

May not be redistributed without permission.

# Responsive Caregiving Strategies that help with Social-Emotional Learning

Children learn best when they are engaged in everyday activities they enjoy with people they know. When children struggle to communicate their needs and wants, it can result in tense interactions. The steps below help ease caregiver-child struggles by helping the caregiver stay calm and teach the child positive communication strategies.

**1**

**Stay calm and model the type of communication you want your child to use.**

**2**

**Tune in to the cues your child is using to tell you what's on their mind.**

**3**

**Put words to the message you think your child is sending you. Watch for a response that you are right.**

**4**

**Give your child an answer to their message.**

**5**

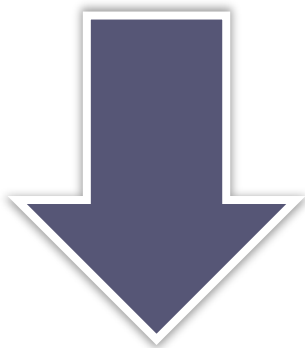
**Use the strategy throughout the day, even when your child is not upset. The repetition of giving your child the words to express their message leads to learning.**

# Signs of Caregiver Frustration

When a caregiver-child interaction becomes frustrating for either the caregiver or the child, it is important for caregivers to stay patient and calmly respond to the child. This teaches the child to also calmly communicate their message.

## Signs of Caregiver Frustration

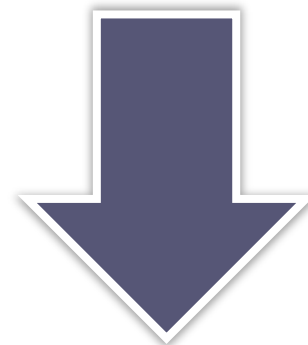
- Yelling
- Saying things you will later regret
- Assuming the worst of the child
- Showing physical aggression
- Withholding affection/interaction
- Assigning unreasonable expectations/punishments
- Tensing your body
- Hovering over your child
- Having feelings of anger



When you have these signals, take a deep breath and calm yourself before interacting with your child.

## Signs of Child Frustration

- Getting overly excited
- Tantruming
- Moving away from caregiver
- Disrupting the environment
- Saying mean words
- Using sounds rather than words
- Hurting themselves
- Being extremely upset
- Hitting, grabbing, biting, spitting, kicking
- Causing danger to themselves or others



When your child has these cues, it's a signal to stay calm and use the H-U-G-S steps.

# Hear

Shape the way your child communicates with you by tuning in and listening to the message behind the behavior your child is using. Below are some caregiver strategies that can help you tune-in and **hear** the child's message.

- Bend to the child's level.
- Look the child in the face.
- Stay calm/neutral.
- Give the child the personal space or the gentle touch they need.
- Tune in and observe the behaviors your child is using.
  - Reaching up
  - Looking toward you
  - Pulling at their clothes
  - Arching their back
  - Spitting out food
  - Crying
  - Pushing something away
  - Collapsing to the floor
- Think about the possible messages the child might be trying to send.
  - Tired
  - Hungry
  - Thirsty
  - Overwhelmed
  - Finished
  - Worried
  - Scared
  - Frustrated
  - Uncomfortable
  - Excited
- Practice observing your child's cues throughout the day during calm times.

# Understand

When your child knows you understand their message the same way they do, they can relax, trust you, and become open to learning new ways to “say” their message. Try these ideas to let your child know you understand what they want, need, and feel.

- Let the child know you see their concerns the same way they do.
- Let the child know you understand what they like.
- Use a voice that matches the situation and compliments the child’s emotions.
  - When the child is excited consider a quiet voice.
  - When the child seems sad or angry consider a sad voice.
  - When the child is withdrawn or clingy consider using an encouraging voice.
- Recognize, accept, and name the child’s emotions.
- Use gestures that match your words.
- Use short and simple phrases to say what you think the child is saying.
  - “I hear you telling me...”
  - “It looks like you are showing me...”
  - “You are showing me you feel...”
  - “I can tell you want...”
- Model the way you want the child to be able to say it.

# Give

When your child knows they are heard and understood, they can learn to hear and understand what the caregiver is communicating back. Give your child a response to their message using some ideas below:

- Give a response to your child's communication (e.g., "You can't have a cookie right now.").
- Give your child positive words to let them know what they CAN do (e.g., "You can have your drink right now and your cookie after dinner.").
- Give your child consistent rules and routines (e.g., "We don't jump on the furniture.").
- Give your child new or alternative ways to meet their need (e. g., "You can jump on your pillows or on your trampoline.").
- Give your child a small number of choices (e.g., "You must hold on when we cross the road. Do you want to hold my hand or hold onto the dog leash with me?").
- Give your child a chance to decide what and how they want to do activities that interest them.
- Give your child the sensory input they need to regroup (e.g., "Can I give you a tight hug and help you feel better?").
- Give your child reassurance that you will help them through the challenging time (e.g., "I'm going to sit here with you if you need me.").
- Provide your child with physical support (e.g., holding hands, hugging, picking the child up, putting the child down).
- Compliment your child for choosing positive or requested behaviors (even a little step).
- Provide your child with appropriate wait time.
- Add new materials to the activity or routine to increase what your child gets to do.
- Note how your child responds back to you and make sure they understand your response.
- Praise your child for demonstrating requested behaviors. (e.g., "Fantastic! You remembered to say 'please' when you asked for more snack.").
- Provide your child words, phrases, and gestures to communicate their messages. (e.g., "We're leaving, say/wave bye.").
- Provide the supervision your child needs to stay safe.

# Social-Emotional Learning

Continue to practice multiple **hear**, **understand**, and **give** responsive strategies during everyday activities and routines. The more often you use this pattern to communicate with your child, the more practice your child gets learning to communicate the way you want them to.

<b>HEAR</b> your child's message	Show your child you <b>UNDERSTAND</b>	<b>GIVE</b> Your child a response
You see your child reach for an object.	Say, "You want the..."	Say, "Okay. I will hand that you. Hold out your hands."
You see your child pointing at something.	Say, "I see, you are showing me the..."	Say, "We both like looking at the ..."
You see your child grab a toy from someone.	Say, "You wanted that toy."	Say, "You can have a turn with that toy next."
You see your child push someone.	Say, "You wanted to be there and you wanted ___ to move."	Say, "You can sit right over here. Let me help you."
You see your child throw food on the floor.	Say, "You are all done with your food. When you are done, say 'done.'"	Say, "I'll clean you up and get you down from your chair since you are done."
You see your child get upset when someone took their toy.	Say, "He took your toy and you want it back. I can help you."	Say, "Let's tell him you want it back." Say, "I'm not done. I need that back."
You see...	Say...	Say...
You see...	Say...	Say...
You see...	Say...	Say...



A NATIONAL  
CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

---

*Strengthening families. Advancing excellence.*