



Sovereign Pediatric Therapy

Recognizing Infant Cues: Our First Form of Communication

By Karen Blackwell, PT, MS, PCS

When do children start communicating with us? The answer is that they begin letting us know how they are feeling at birth. Infants use non-verbal communication referred to as "cues." They express themselves through eye contact, facial expressions, sounds, body posturing, movements, and bodily functions. These cues communicate an infant's readiness to interact, ability to handle environmental stimuli, or need to have a situation changed. Parents and caregivers can foster communication and positive relationships with their infants by recognizing and responding to their cues.

Infant cues are categorized as engagement or disengagement cues. Engagement cues let you know that your infant is ready to interact. When a child shows engagement cues it is an opportune time to stimulate learning and to share enjoyable times together. Disengagement cues provide the infant a means for letting you know that something needs to be changed and it is not an ideal time to expect the infant to interact and learn. Engagement and disengagement cues can be either subtle or potent, which further helps to guide your responses. Understanding the type of cues your infant uses and the intensity of those cues will improve the quality of your mutual interactions.

Engagement Cues

Engagement cues signal readiness to interact and learn. They indicate a good time for you to talk, hold, feed, or play with your infant. Attending to engagement cues encourages your infant to attempt to try new activities and engage in further interactions and explorations (Picture 1).



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Potent engagement cues include smiling, giggling, babbling, eyes wide and bright, smooth movements of arms and legs, head turning toward you, reaching toward you, feeding sounds, and mutual prolonged eye

contact. These potent engagement cues mean that your infant is happy and content and ready to learn and explore.

Subtle engagement cues can also signal a readiness to interact and include brow raising, hands open with fingers

slightly flexed, head rising, eyes wide and bright, and feeding posture with arms held close to body and hands held under chin. Adapting your interactions and providing positive reactions to your infant's subtle engagement behaviors will foster readiness and progression to more potent engagement cues and effective interactions.

Disengagement Cues

Disengagement cues show that your infant needs to take a break. They may need to take a rest from eating, playing, being held, or an over-stimulating environment. Disengagement cues can be altered by your responses and potent disengagement states are often averted.

Potent disengagement cues are quite obvious and require immediate intervention. They include crying, whining, fussing, head shaking, pale/red skin, pushing away, fingers straight and wide open, hands joined together over stomach, back arching, head shaking, strongly turning the head away, tray pounding or overhead beating movements of the arms, squirming, coughing, choking, spitting up, vomiting, and withdrawal from an alert state to a sleep state. These "discontent" cues signal that it is time to stop the present interaction.

Subtle disengagement cues provide an opportunity to intervene before the infant resorts to full-blown distress (potent disengagement). When these cues are identified early, your infant's behavior can often be changed to a more calm and engaging state. Signals of subtle disengagement include bringing the eyebrows together (wrinkled forehead), turning eyes away (gaze aversion), frowning, pulling on clothes, hand to mouth, finger extension, hand-behind-head, hand-to-ear, protruding tongue, dull eyes, fast breathing, quickened heart rate, startles, tremors, twitches, hiccups, and yawning. Subtle cues can sometimes be difficult to interpret. For example, if your infant brings his eyebrows together (usually a subtle disengagement cue), it may or may not signal eminent distress. Look for cues that occur together. Clustering of cues is more significant than a single cue presented by itself (Picture 2).



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Responding to Cues

In any communicative interaction, the participants respond to each other by modifying or adapting their responses, depending upon how the other person acts or reacts (contingent interaction). Infants show a more positive

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attitude, increased alertness and longer periods of mutual attention when the caregiver and infant learn to adapt, modify and change their behaviors in response to each other. Infants communicate through their cues, and if these are ignored, communication can break down. Not having communication reinforced, the infant may exaggerate his efforts (going to an extreme level of distress) or lessen his attempts to communicate



(Picture 3).

Responding promptly to your infant's cues is important. An immediate response helps the infant to connect the caregiver's response to his own behavior. This "attunement" or contingency of responsiveness (one's action leading to an action by someone else) helps to positively shape the infant's behavior, as the infant begins to realize his active role as an important participant in the parent-child interaction.

Suggestions for Effective Parent-Infant Interaction:

- Position your infant for comfort and safety
- Face to face" positioning provides for optimizing interactions
- State of arousal influences an infant's ability to interact (i.e., drowsy, quiet alert, active alert) and your infant will be most responsive in the quiet alert state
- Know your infant's cues and respond to them in a timely manner
- Take turns when interacting, giving your infant a chance for expression and alternating with your responses (contingent interaction)
- Give positive emotional feedback through talking, singing, touching, looking, smiling, holding, or comforting to help establish a sense of security and successful interactions
- Observe carefully how your infant uses expressions and movements as he responds to you

Summary

Understanding the cues your infant uses will help you to be sensitive to the meaning of his non-verbal communication and will help to shape your responses. Through your recognition, sensitivity and responsiveness, you can positively influence your infant's behavior, language and overall development.

Karen Blackwell, PT, MS, PCS, is a pediatric physical therapist at Sovereign Pediatric Therapy in Naperville, IL. For a list of references, or for further information on this topic, please e-mail Karen at kblackwell@sovrehab.com.

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New to Our Team

Sovereign Pediatric Therapy has expanded our staff to meet the increasing need for quality pediatric therapy services at all three of our locations. We welcome the following therapists to our team:

Joining our Chicago Team

- **Charity Visser, MS, OTR/L** is a graduate of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and has 8 years of experience as a pediatric occupational therapist working with children in a variety of settings.

Joining our Crystal Lake Team

- **Wendy Kontos PT** is a Pediatric Physical Therapist with over 20 years of experience working with children in the clinical setting.
- **Michelle Darschewski MS, CCC-SLP** joins our team with over 10 years of experience providing client-directed speech therapy to children.
- **Paula Fick, OTR/L** is excited to join our team with 10 years as a Pediatric Occupational Therapist. She has experience treating children in the school and clinical setting.
- **Liz Scott PT, DPT** is a graduate of Marquette University Physical Therapy program where she specialized in Pediatric studies.

Joining our Naperville Team

- **Karen Blackwell, PT, MS, PCS** is a Board Certified Pediatric Specialist and physical therapist with over 25 years of experience. She is NDT trained and is an early intervention physical therapy evaluator and service provider.
- **Crystal Bocher, MS, OTR/L** is a pediatric occupational therapist with over 10 years of experience and will be meeting the needs of our children requiring after school services.
- **Renora Lewis, MS, OTR/L** is a graduate of the University of Chicago and provides services to families and children needing Saturday hours.



Do you have questions or concerns regarding your child's development? Sovereign Pediatric Therapy offers free screenings. Call any office to schedule. For more information regarding our physical therapy services or to schedule an appointment, call 630.585.7337.



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