

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Afraid of Strangers

Question: My toddler is petrified of anyone new. He clings to me and sometimes screams, even when the person isn't interacting with him. How can I help my son be less afraid?

Your toddler is beginning to see himself going out into the world apart from you. This can be a scary thing and can cause fears of new people and new situations. His emotional reaction in these unfamiliar experiences is actually a healthy and positive sign of his development. It shows that he feels safe and secure with you. He is taking steps to internalize the secure bond that you share so that he can feel surer about forming new relationships on his own. You can help your child feel more comfortable around new people by promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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Think about the messages you are sending.

Your child looks to you for information about how to relate to new people and respond to new situations. Your tone of voice, facial expressions, words and body language all send messages to your child. If you look worried or sound scared when your child is interacting with a new person, it is likely your child will as well.

Through his now classic experiment, Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley demonstrated just how powerfully parents communicate concern or approval to their children through their facial expressions alone. Campos used mothers in his experiments, but the results would look similar with fathers. Campos found that when mothers were told by the experimenters to make a fear face—with an open mouth and eyes and raised eyebrows—children refused to try something new. When mothers were told to show a happy face—using smiles and encouraging looks, their children were much more likely to take a risk. Campos concludes:

This particular study powerfully demonstrates the role of nonverbal communication in determining the child's behavior in an uncertain context ... [Even] by eleven to twelve months of age, the baby is already doing what all of us do when something unusual happens—we look around to figure out how other people are reacting.

Even if you aren't communicating worried feelings, you can reassure your child by what you do and say:

- When meeting new people, let your child know that he is safe with you by remaining calm and positive. Use a soothing tone when introducing your child to a stranger.

- If your child turns away or starts to cry, continue the calm tone and reassure your child with your words, smiles and hugs: "You don't want to say hi right now. That's okay. I am here to help you."
- The American Academy of Pediatrics assures parents that, while frustrating, fear of strangers is very common during the toddler years. They give the following suggestions for dealing with your child's feelings:
- Don't make fun of your child's fear. Accept his fear and speak reassuringly.
- Don't force him to confront people who scare him.

2**Help your child feel safe and secure.**

Your child's first and most important relationship is with you. It builds the foundation for how he will interact with others.

- Express empathy and understanding. Let your child know that it is okay to be scared. You can say things like: "Sometimes I feel nervous when I meet new people, too. Hold my hand, and we'll do it together."
- Always reassure your child: "I will keep you safe." Let him know that there are other adults he can trust to keep him safe, too, like family members or caregivers.

3**Give your child time to warm up to new people.**

Your child's unique style of approaching new people and experiences is part of his inborn temperament. If your child takes longer to warm up to someone new, let him get used to that person very gradually.

Nathan Fox of the University of Maryland has studied the role of temperament in toddlers. Through his research, Fox has found that there may be a genetic predisposition in some children to be shy or anxious in new situations. They take longer to feel comfortable in new situations.

If his behavior seems embarrassing in front of others or they are critical, just tell them in a matter of fact and accepting way: "My son needs time to warm up to new people."

4**Watch what your child does.**

Tune into your child and how he manages best, then support him in using the strategies he already has to cope with stressful situations.

What does he do to help himself calm down?

- Does he use a blanket, stuffed animal or special object?
- Does he like to hear songs or stories?
- Does he usually watch first before interacting with new people and activities?

Nathan Fox has also found that parenting styles make a difference. When young children who get upset and stressed by new experiences have parents who help them manage their emotions, they are less likely to be fearful and anxious as preschoolers and school-age children.

Once you see what your child does to manage his feelings and help himself calm down, point his strategies out to him. Remind your child that he can use these tools. When your child feels in control of his own emotions, he will be able to start taking small steps toward being with and understanding new people. You can say something like:

- "I remember the last time you felt scared. Holding your teddy bear helped you feel safe. Let's go find it and bring it with us when we go out."

5

Talk about your child's feelings.

Since your child is still developing the ability to express himself in words, his clinginess and crying are his way of telling you he wants to be near you. He needs your help to build a vocabulary to talk about his emotions. Labeling his feelings helps your child gain a sense of control and sets him on a path to interact more successfully with others.

- Give him the words for what he might be feeling like: "There are a lot of new people here, and it seems like you are nervous. Let's go sit in a quiet place until you are ready."

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Help your child begin to learn how to "read" people's behavior.

The research of Ross Thompson at the University of California at Davis has shown that children gain insight into "what goes on in people's hearts and minds" depending on how their parents interpret "the everyday events of their lives."

Your child also needs your help to interpret the world around him. Use everyday moments to talk about what other people might be thinking or feeling. Explain to him the best you can the reasons for other people's actions.

- Say something like: "The woman who came to our door today is our new mail carrier. She wanted to say hi to you, but you were feeling a little scared. That's OK. She'll come back to deliver our mail tomorrow, and you can come to the door if you want to, or you don't have to."

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Use pretend play to practice meeting new people and understanding them.

Through play, your child can “replay” events in his life and control what happens. Let your child take the lead in his play. Build off of his ideas and try not to take over. Use pretend play as an opportunity to:

- **Help your child practice what it might be like to meet new people.** For example, you can pretend to be at the grocery store and act as the cashier. Show your child how to pay for his items and model language to use like: “Thanks for shopping! Have a good day.”
- **Use puppets, toys or other objects** to act out different scenarios.
- **Pretend that you are scared in a new situation.** See how your child reacts.
- **Use books and storytelling, too.** Point out different characters and what they might be feeling like: “Look, that little girl is crying. She feels sad.” Talk about why the characters act a certain way: “That puppy felt scared, so he ran away and hid under the bed.”

Not only do these strategies help your child learn to be less afraid in meeting new people, they also help him learn to understand himself and others better—the skill of Perspective Taking.