



Topic:

Why young children show positive social and emotional responses when they learn to do something that produces expected results

Research tells us:

- Young children express happiness when their actions bring about interesting and expected responses.
- When the relationship between something a young child has learned to do and the rewarding response that follows it is very clear and can be counted on, positive social-emotional responses occur with greater frequency.

YES! *I* made it happen!

Picture a rainbow-colored mobile made with several dangling, bell-trimmed toys. Mom puts her baby into an infant seat placed within reach of the eye-catching toys. Baby contemplates the bright display. Before long, perhaps by happenstance, her hand strikes the mobile and she's rewarded with colorful movement and the pleasant, tinkling sound of bells. As baby learns that her action causes these pleasing sights and sounds, she also learns to repeat the action. Every time she touches the mobile, the outcome is the same, and she comes to expect this delightful reward.

An examination of research on learning opportunities that share these characteristics—learning opportunities tied to expected rewards—shows that they produce positive social and emotional responses in young children. That is to say, children react to such “response-contingent” learning opportunities with behaviors like smiling, cooing, attentiveness, and laughter—responses that clearly indicate enjoyment and mastery of this type of learning situation.

The available research also shows that when the expected reward fails to follow the child's action, or when the reward occurs in a haphazard way, the child is more likely to respond negatively, with ▶



Babies eagerly move hands amid hanging toys, pat an inflated ball, and touch wind chimes, both expecting and smiling happily at the rewards of movement and/or sound caused by their actions.

Acting on the evidence:

Help young children learn about their capabilities by responding consistently to their efforts to get your attention and by arranging toys and materials so that they produce interesting effects when a child interacts with them.

behaviors like fussing, frowning, crying, and restlessness that are sure signs of frustration and unhappiness.

Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., evaluated 42 research studies including more than 1,000 children to find out (1) if available research supports the relationship between children's response-contingent learning experience and their positive social and emotional responses to it and (2) if different kinds of response-contingent learning draw different kinds of social or emotional responses. By bringing together the findings from such a large body of research, he aimed to identify guidelines and practices that parents, early childhood teachers and other practitioners can use to set up learning experiences for very young children.

When taken together, the studies Dr. Dunst examined show that young children certainly benefit from learning tied to consistent, rewarding results. The Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development recommends that parents and practitioners take a look at children's everyday learning experiences and try to rearrange them or to add features that will let a young child do something to get a desirable response. Rather than simply doing something *to* the child, the idea is to arrange activities, events or materials so that the child *makes something happen*.

Let's look in on one young mom as she puts these research findings into practice:

Six-month-old Charlotte has been a "water baby" since birth, according to her mom, Dottie Lang. "Charly seems happiest when submerged in a warm tub ... utterly relaxed, and with the most peaceful smile," Dottie explains, adding with a grin, "I think she's half mermaid!"

Because the baby so enjoys the sensation of water, her bath time has proven to be the perfect time for simple mom-and-baby "games" that are helping Charlotte, who was born with Down syndrome, learn about her abilities and what happens when she makes something happen.

With Charlotte placed on her back, her head and shoulders propped above water level on a foam insert in the baby tub, Dottie lifts the baby's legs and moves them up and down in the warm water. "Good kicking, Charly!" Dottie exclaims. "Here comes the waterfall," she says, and pours a cupful of water onto the baby's tummy when Charly kicks. Charly gasps, squirms, and chuckles with delight. Every time the baby moves her legs in a kicking motion, Dottie rewards her with praise and "waterfalls." In a few minutes, mom changes the game to leg pushes, helping Charly push her feet against mom's open palm. When the baby pushes, mom hops back and says, "What strong pushes!" Then she uses a rubber toy to squeeze a flurry of air bubbles that tickle the baby's chin. A perfect reward that inspires Charly to push again and again.



To the delight of her little one, this mom welcomes each leg lift with a wide smile, speaking happy words of praise, and tickling baby's tummy with a gentle-sounding rattle toy.



Baby gleefully vocalizes again and again, knowing Dad will respond each time with gentle touches, praise, and funny faces.

Take another look!

Read or download the complete research synthesis in the *Bridges* section of www.researchtopractice.info:

Dunst, C. J. (2003). Social-emotional consequences of response-contingent learning opportunities. *Bridges*, 1(4).

Exciting print, web-based and multimedia materials of interest to parents and early childhood practitioners are available from the Center for Evidence-Based Practices. To order by telephone, please call 800-824-1174.

