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Respond to Your Baby's Communication

How do babies communicate? All babies start to communicate well before they know any words.

A baby's smile says, "I'm happy" or "Play that game again!"
A baby cries to let us know, "I'm hungry" or "I need a diaper change."
Babies coo to say, "I feel good."

From the first month on, babies listen and pay attention to important voices around them. They discover their voices and play with sounds in squeals, grunts, coos and gurgles. Around six to ten months of age, babies discover that they can join sounds together to babble strings like "dadada" or "gagaga." When babies are about nine months of age, they start to point or reach. These gestures may mean, "I want that!" or "Look at me!"

Use the Two R's: Recognize and Respond

Family members can help get the communication game started by following two simple guidelines. You will probably notice that you are already doing this naturally. If you are, just keep it up! Follow the two R's of early communication:

- **Recognize your baby's signals.** Ask yourselves: "What is my baby trying to say with his or her eyes, face, body or voice?"
- **Respond to these signals as communication.** Remind yourselves, "Talk about my baby's idea."

Recognizing Signals

You will notice over time that your baby will use a variety of ways to express herself. Several possibilities are listed below. Take time to observe your own baby. How is your baby communicating without words? What do you think the baby means? Is she asking for attention or help? Does she want you to look at what she is looking at? Does she want more of something or want you to stop? Is she trying to share something fun with you? Have you noticed that even her cries have different meanings?

- Gestures
- Smiling
- Vocal Sounds
- Anticipating (e.g., hears pat-a-cake and waits for game to start)
- Eye gaze
- Body movements (kicking, getting excited)
- Reaching
- Watching
- Scooting
- Touching
- Cries
- Facial Expressions
- Getting Mad
- Vocal Protests or Cries
- Making happy sounds

Responding to Signals

Remember to look for anything-a facial expression, eye contact, or a movement that might have meaning for you. Now step two is to respond - when you give a response to your baby's signals, you encourage the baby to communicate more. You let the baby know, "I heard you!"

Every time you respond to a signal, your baby realizes that her gesture, or vocalization, or facial expression made you understand. Your baby will try to communicate that way again. Every time you respond, you are demonstrating that conversations have two sides, and that both partners get a turn (like that volleyball game!). Babies love to communicate. Because they do not always hear us, babies who are hard of hearing or deaf may need us to respond very clearly.

If your hard-of-hearing baby is just getting used to hearing aids, you want to stay close, use a pleasant but clear voice, and talk about the baby's idea. If your family will be using a form of sign language, you want to stay in the baby's line of vision, look at what the baby looks at, match the baby's facial expression, and use simple signs and gestures.

The most important point at the beginning is to be sure that your baby knows that you responded. This will help your baby begin to predict that you will respond. That makes conversations exciting for both of you. The words will come in time.