

Imitation

What is Imitation?

Cognitive development is the process through which the brain takes in information to “make meaning” – something our brains do naturally. The way your baby’s brain makes meaning is through experience, which is made up mostly of interaction with the important people in his life.

This means that learning is social, and for babies, involves imitating the people around them. Imitation provides children with the opportunity to practice and master new skills. Imitation also serves as a basis for the development of empathy, or the ability to experience what another person is feeling.

IMITATION IN INFANTS

- ★ Infants in every culture show the same ability to imitate.
- ★ Imitation is not a skill babies learn – it is an ability they are born with.
- ★ An infant’s ability to imitate simple actions, such as sticking out her tongue, comes from the same part of the brain that allows young children to develop empathy.



IMITATION IN TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

- ★ Children pay attention to what other children do.
- ★ Younger children look up to older children.
- ★ Games that involve imitation and other social interaction help children feel a social connection with other children.
- ★ Parents may notice how much their children “pick things up” from other children.

Why Imitation Matters

Imitation matters because it helps children learn.

- ★ Even at a very young age, children imitate their parents' behavior. Parent and caregiver behavior presents powerful lessons to a child and leaves impressions on the developing mind. Children store in their mind both positive and negative images that may be imitated or tested at a later time.

What Parents Can Do

WITH INFANTS, remember that almost every interaction involves an opportunity for imitation.

- ★ Slow, repeated movements help infants take in new information. For example, as early as one month, if you stick out your tongue at a baby and wait, chances are, she will stick her tongue out at you.
- ★ Make sounds with your mouth and your baby will try to copy you; it also helps if you repeat the sounds your child makes.



- ★ Use music: Sing songs with your child... a tambourine, drum or piano keys are fun for an older baby to try.
- ★ Tap the table or clap your hands to see if your baby will copy you.
- ★ Put your arms above your head and say "Sooo big." An older baby will likely raise his arms too, though it may take a few days for him to copy you.

WITH TODDLERS, remember that they love to imitate you, to help, and to show you how much they can do.

- ★ Children between 12-36 months learn by doing, not just watching.
- ★ Show your child how you do simple tasks, such as putting on shoes or holding a spoon, and let her try.
- ★ Try physical activities: jump, hop, skip, and crawl. Your child will try too.
- ★ Engage your child in daily household tasks (setting the table, folding laundry, putting away toys). Toddlers love to imitate their parents and help.

WITH PRESCHOOLERS, remember that imitation now involves you modeling behavior and setting expectations.

- ★ Experts say parent imitation/modeling is essential for kids to develop healthy academic skills. If you want your child to become a reader, let her see you reading often at home. If you want a child to value learning, ask questions and learn new skills yourself.
- ★ Model the behavior you want to see in your child. Say please and thank you. Your child might not say it right away, but she will over time.
- ★ Make your rules match your expectations and your own behavior. If you expect your child to put his dirty clothes in a hamper, you should do the same with yours.
- ★ No parent is perfect all the time. If you do or say something you wish your child had not seen or heard, repair the interaction and explain the consequences to your child.
- ★ Explain to your child how what works in one place might not work in another. For example, loud voices are OK at the park, but not at the library. Explain why.