

Science briefing

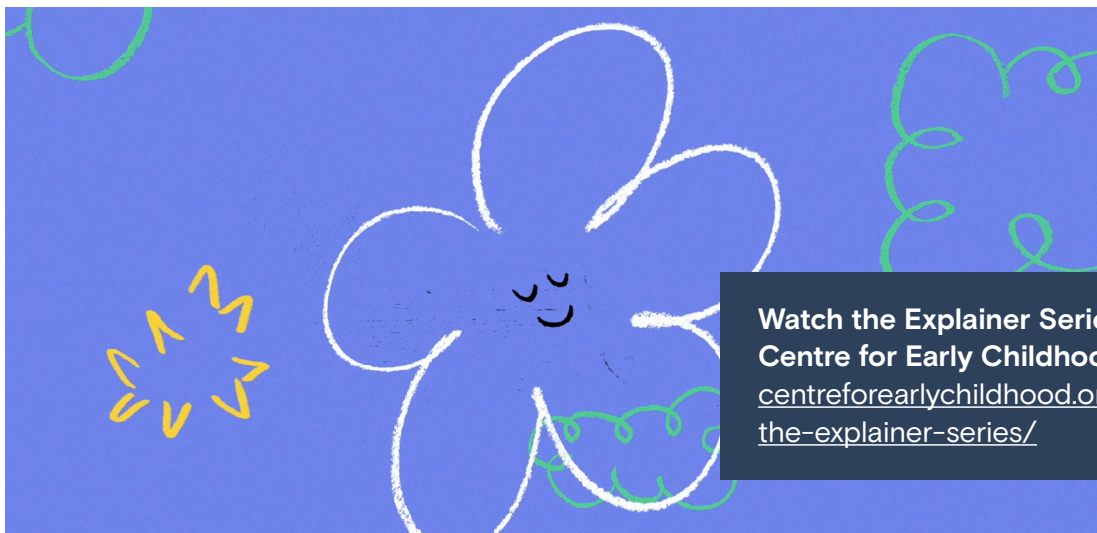
Noticing and navigating feelings

The Centre for Early Childhood's Explainer on noticing and navigating feelings explains the importance of attuned conversations with babies and young children.

In these conversations, adults notice a child's emotional state, name what they are feeling and help them to manage these feelings.

The film also describes other ways adults can talk to babies and young children about emotions.

This briefing summarises the science behind this animation.

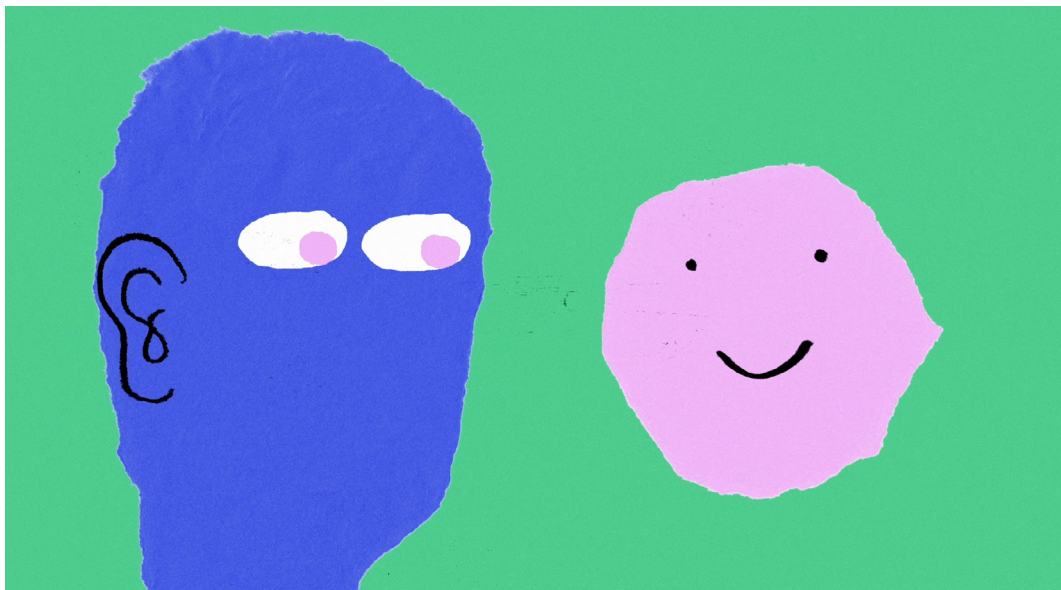


Watch the Explainer Series on the
Centre for Early Childhood website
[centreforearlychildhood.org/
the-explainer-series/](https://centreforearlychildhood.org/the-explainer-series/)

Attunement unpacked

1. Emotional attunement involves noticing, understanding and responding to another person's emotional state in a sensitive and appropriate way. When adults are emotionally attuned to babies and young children they notice cues, validate children's emotions and appropriately respond to them.

2. Cues are the signals children give us which communicate their emotional experiences and needs. Cues include facial expressions, body posture, eye gaze, sounds, words and movements. Attuned adults will notice and respond to cues in different ways, both verbally through words and sounds, and non-verbally through emotions, gestures and actions.
3. Attuned responses are sensitive and appropriate to the child's own emotions and needs, with the adult tuning into the child's emotional state and responding in a way that reflects and supports it. For example, if a child is experiencing joy in a game, an attuned adult would notice this and might mirror their joy by smiling back at them, playing along with them, and verbalising their positive emotions – “isn't this fun!”. If a child is sad, a parent might slow down and reflect the child's sadness, before trying to cheer them up.
4. Attunement is closely related to other concepts in the Explainer Series. When children struggle to manage their emotions, attuned adults provide co-regulation: they notice the child's emotional state and help them return to calm. This is also an example of contingent responsiveness.
5. Being attuned means being child-led. It is not about always doing what a child wants but about being sensitive to their needs. For example, if a child is deeply engrossed in play when it is getting close to the time to leave the house, we should give them advance warning, explaining why we need to leave. We might be more sensitive and sympathetic when asking them to stop their game and put on their coat and shoes.



Attunement is harder if adults experience stress and adversity

Some adults may struggle to be attuned, particularly when children display negative or intense emotions¹.

The capacity to be attuned to a baby or young child is dependent on an adult's ability to observe a baby's behaviour and to consider the emotional needs behind it. This is called "reflective function"^{2,3}. Adults who did not receive sensitive care in childhood may have more difficulty developing reflective function^{4,5}.

Current stressors – such as mental health problems or overwhelming life pressures – can also make it harder for an adult to be emotionally present, notice cues and keep a child's needs in mind⁶.

Attunement supports social and emotional development

Attuned interactions are positive for the child in the moment, helping them make sense of their feelings, and sharing their joy or soothing them if they are distressed. They also support the child's social and emotional development in several ways:

Managing our emotions

Helping children to recognise and label emotions

When adults notice a child's feelings and respond with empathy, this helps the child to learn about their own feelings. For example, if a baby cries and parents show sadness in their tone and facial expression, this may help the baby to recognise their emotion⁷. When adults talk to babies and young children about how they are feeling in any particular moment, this helps the child to recognise their emotions and the bodily feelings associated with these emotions, and to give them a name.



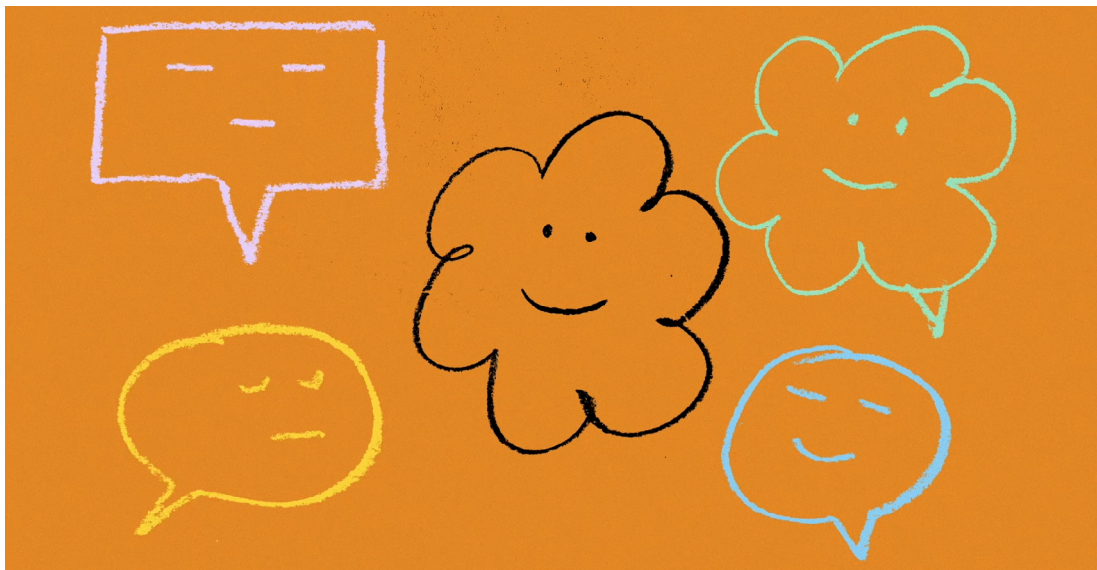
“When adults notice a child's feelings and respond with empathy, this helps the child to learn about their own feelings.”

Having ways to manage emotions

Attuned conversations can help children manage emotions and calm down when they are experiencing overwhelming feelings. Adults might use their words to soothe a child. Or they might provide scaffolding to help children regulate themselves, for example by providing guidance to help the child to calm down: “You could try taking big breaths into your tummy now.” This all helps the child both to feel better in the moment; and, through repeated attuned interactions, children will develop the important skills they need to manage their own emotions⁸.

As children get older we can talk to them about their feelings and encourage them to reflect on their experiences, and share how they are feeling and why. It can also be helpful for children to talk about how other people manage feelings. These conversations are often easiest when the child is feeling calm – not in the midst of experiencing big feelings.

As adults, we can show children how to manage emotions by modelling it ourselves, and we can talk to them about how to cope with big feelings. Research shows that children develop their own responses to emotionally challenging situations in part, by observing how adults respond to the same situations^{9,10}.



Knowing ourselves

Understanding our thoughts and feelings is an important part of knowing ourselves. If children are able to reflect on their own experiences, preferences, and responses to the world around them, they will be better able to make informed decisions and take charge of their lives.

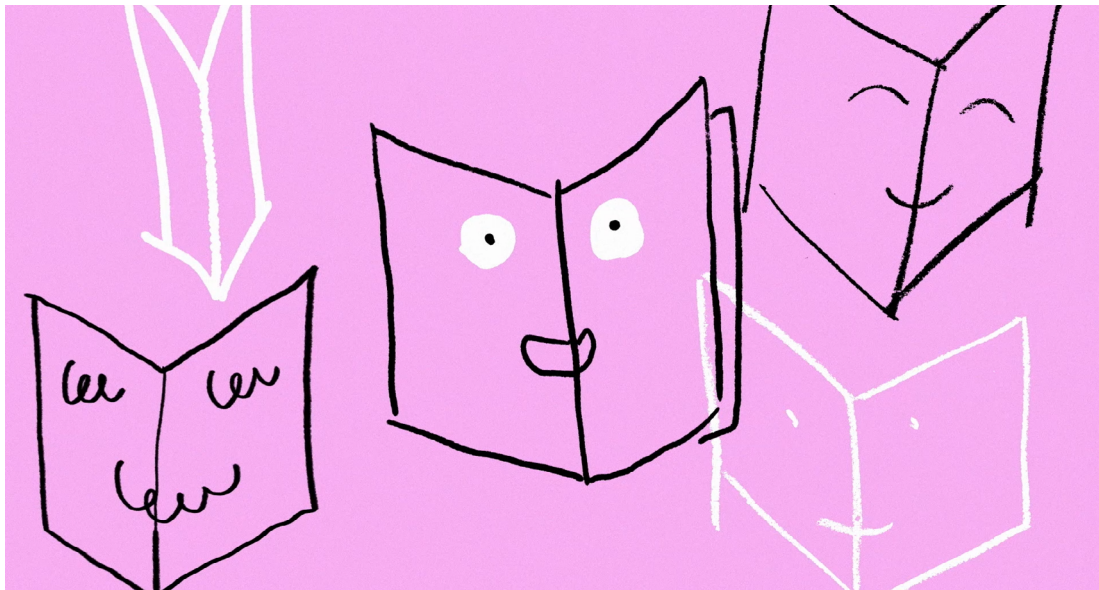
Nurturing our relationships

Attuned interactions teach children that they can rely on other people for support when they are in difficulty¹¹. They also give children a template of a positive, caring relationship which can help them as they go on to develop relationships of their own.

Communicating with others

Attuned interactions can support shared attention – where adult and child are both focussed on the same object or event. Shared attention supports children to learn new words: the adult may label what the child sees or experiences, and this helps the child to associate the word with the object or experience.

Conversations about feelings give children an emotional vocabulary that can help them make sense of what is happening to them and the people around them, and to communicate with others about their experiences of the world¹². If a child knows more feeling words they will be better able to discriminate amongst different emotions, to recognise, label and to understand feelings in themselves and others.



Books and stories can also support children's developing understanding of emotions, as they provide different characters with different feelings to explore. Books also allow children to process emotions in their own time: in real life, facial expressions are often fleeting but, in a book, children can examine a character's facial expression and think about how they might be feeling and why. Through reading stories and talking about people in books, children can expand their emotional vocabulary in ways that help them to talk and think about their own thoughts and feelings^{13,14}.

Prolonged missatunement can be detrimental to development

No adult is attuned to a child all the time. Some adults consistently miss cues given by children, attributing their behaviour incorrectly or responding insensitively. This is called misattunement.

Misattuned responses to a child's distress might include:

- Ignoring or dismissing negative emotions
- Interpreting a child's frustration or distress as bad behaviour and responding harshly
- Trying to distract a child rather than acknowledging their emotion.

Repeated and consistent experiences such as these can be distressing for a child in the short term¹⁵ and damaging for their emotional development. Children may learn to stop expressing their needs, or to unconsciously reject their needs because they learn that these needs will not be met¹⁶. When a baby or young child's needs are consistently not met and their distress is not soothed, they can experience a high level of stress, and this might impact their psychological and physiological development¹⁷.

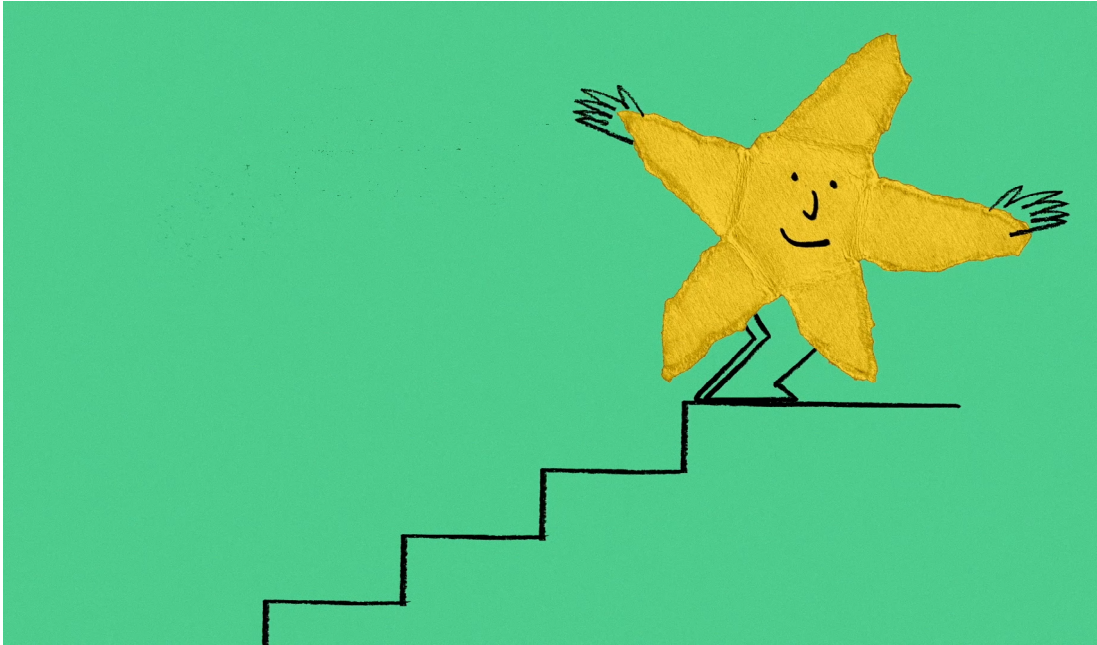
Attunement helps a child to feel safe and loved

Attuned conversations enable children to feel understood and accepted. When adults empathise and reflect back what the child is feeling, children learn that their experiences are real, meaningful and worthy of attention. These experiences support a child's sense of self-worth – they learn that they are valued and valuable.

Through experiencing attuned interactions children begin to learn and expect that their emotional needs will be met by caregivers, and this supports the development of secure relationships. When children feel that they can rely on an adult it also gives them confidence to explore the world around them.

Attuned conversations uphold a child's rights – enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously¹⁸.

While sensitive, responsive care benefits all children, it is especially protective for those facing adversity. Attuned relationships act like a buffer to reduce the emotional impact of stressful experiences on wellbeing and development^{19,20}.



Using attunement in practice

If you are working with families you might notice how attuned parents or caregivers behave towards their children. If parents appear less responsive, you might reflect on why this is. Perhaps stressful things are happening in their life which makes it hard for them to be mindful of their baby? Or perhaps they have experienced adversity in their childhood and need more specialist support to develop their reflective function, as well as their ability to consider their babies' emotional needs?

If you work with children yourself you may want to reflect on what helps you to notice and respond to children's emotions. What helps you stay attuned? For example, if you work in a nursery setting, how do you notice and respond sensitively to how children are feeling when they are dropped off each morning? You could also consider how you bring more conversations about emotions into your day-to-day interaction as with children.

If you want to talk about attunement in an accessible way with other adults, you may want to use words like tuning in to babies, noticing and understanding a child, or picking up on feelings and responding gently.

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