

Young children learn about other people primarily through **social inference**: drawing conclusions about people based on observation of and experience with them. One of the most important aspects of this social understanding is that other people are mental beings who have thoughts, beliefs, desires, preferences, and points of view that are separate from, and often different than one's own. Child development experts call this social understanding a **theory of mind**, and gaining it is an important milestone in young children's social development.



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Building a Theory of Mind

As you might expect, this understanding starts out very simply in infancy and gets more complex over the next several years. During the first 12 months, infants are beginning to recognize themselves as individuals, separate from their caregivers. Babies show an increasing interest in others during their first year, particularly with their primary caregivers.



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Infants are also quickly learning to understand and respond to social cues from the important adults in their lives. In fact, babies as young as 12 months old show they can tell the difference between someone doing something *intentionally*, such as pushing over a pile of books, and the same person doing it *accidentally*, such as brushing against the books and causing them to fall.

This may not seem like a big deal, but it is an important step that lays the groundwork for more complex social judgments that will begin developing later in early childhood. Just think about the difference a judgment about someone's intention has on how you feel and think about that person and what you do in response. If I think you are late to our dinner date on purpose, I will think, feel, and react *very* differently than if I think your lateness was caused by something out of your control!

The ability to accurately judge another person's intentions is enormously important for successful relationships. The fact that children's understanding of others' intentions begins to develop before their first birthday is astonishing. But it's only one of the types of social information babies and toddlers are beginning to piece together through their countless observations.

Like Me, Not Like Me

In fact, the first 3 years are a time when young children begin learning an amazing amount of information about other people’s minds. In their second year, mobile infants and young toddlers become more aware of themselves as independent individuals, and along with development comes a growing understanding that other people have separate thoughts and feelings, too! In general, once children’s understanding of themselves as separate individuals progresses, they first learn the many ways *another* person is similar to themselves. Then they learn that another person can be different.



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Some examples of this developmental progression from “we are the same” to “we are different” during the first 3 years are included in the table below.

A child first learns:	And then learns:
You can perceive (see, smell, taste, etc.) things, just like I can.	What you see (smell, etc.) can be different than what I see.
You want the same thing that I do (and just as strongly!).	You want something different than I do.
You have things you like and don’t like, too.	Your preferences can be different than mine.
You know and remember things like I do.	Just because I know something is true doesn’t mean you know it, too (i.e., I can trick you!).

The understandings in the right column of the table above are much more challenging than the ones in the left column, because holding two opposite ideas in our minds at the same time is a harder task for developing brains. Nevertheless, by 3 years old, children are already showing signs that they are beginning to grasp some important things about how other people think.

On the other hand, to keep this social ability in perspective, misunderstanding someone else’s intentions or misreading their thoughts is fairly common even for adults. In fact, you can probably easily remember the last time it happened to you! Perhaps equally important, then, is to help children learn how to *repair* a relationship when misunderstandings happen. Of course, one of the best ways of learning a new skill is to see it modeled, so think about how you can show young children how to “fix things” when *you* have misunderstood *their* intentions.

Supporting the Development of Theory of Mind

Research studies show that the more caring adults talk to infants and toddlers about what they and others think, want, remember, like, and feel, the higher the children score on assessments of social understanding and skills as preschoolers. Although mental and emotional states can be difficult to explain to children, children are geniuses at figuring out what words mean by hearing them used many times in many different situations.

Talking with children about another person's inner mental world can happen just about any time and anywhere! During exploration and play, educators can comment on each child's intentions and ideas. During meals, educators can talk with children about their preferences. While looking at photos of an earlier event, educators can ask children about their memories. While reading a storybook, educators can pause to ask or comment about what a character sees, thinks, believes, or intends.

The possibilities are endless, and every conversation and comment helps infants and toddlers build their understanding of other people and gain social competence.



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