

AGES
0-1
p.223

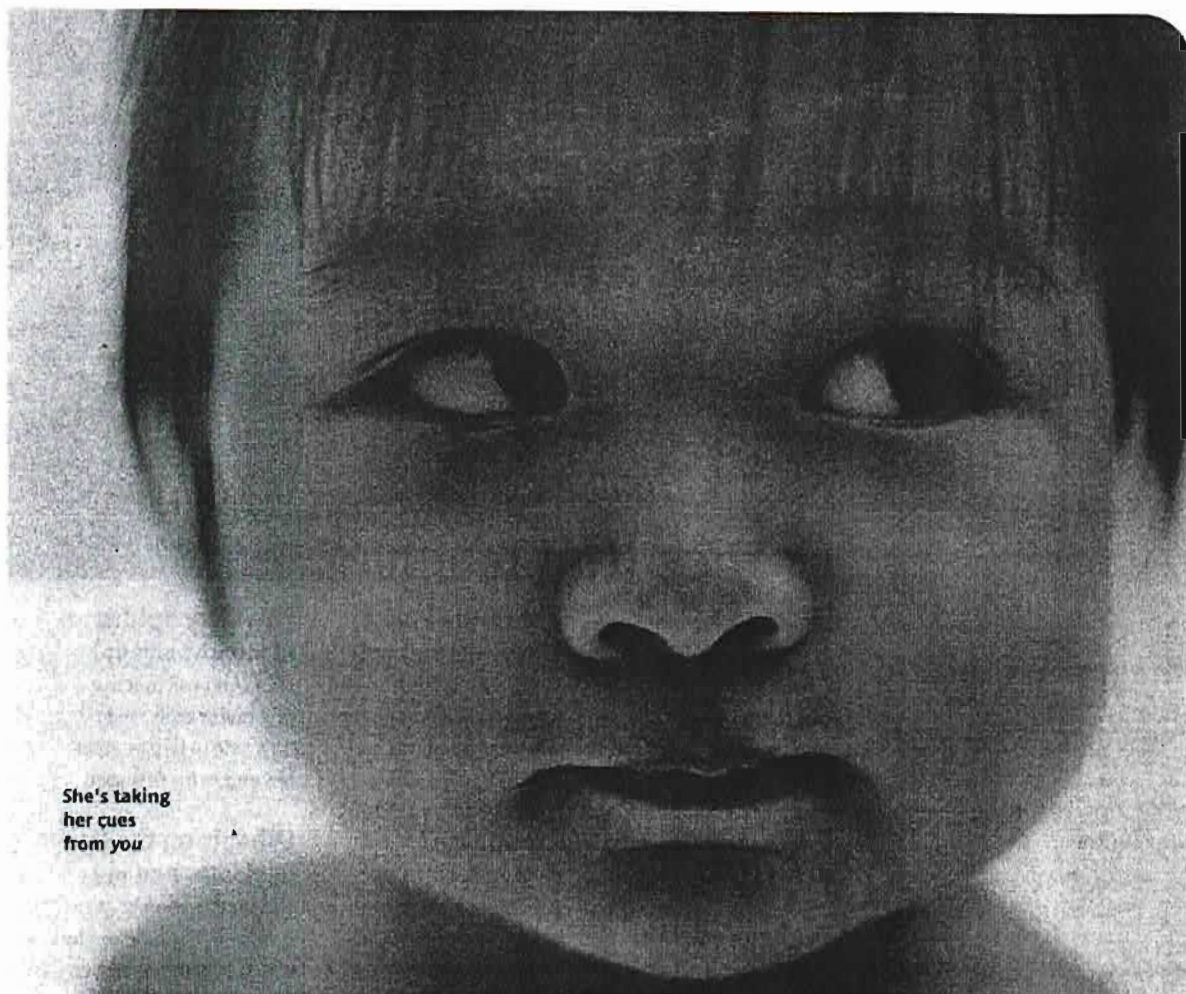
AGES
1-2
p.226

AGES
2-3
p.230

AGES
3-5
p.236

AGES
5-8
p.239

AGES
8-12
p.242



She's taking her cues from you

How your baby "reads" you

AGES
0-1

It's a strategy you'd easily use with an older child: shooting her a look that explicitly says, "You'd better not pinch your sister!"

Turns out, it's one you can try with your infant, too. Babies as young as 10 to 12 months old can read your don't-you-dare glares and interpret a warning in your voice. In fact, this ability—called social referencing—helps them figure out how to act and what to be wary of in their new world.

"Because they haven't yet mastered language, babies rely on Mom's emotions to tell them if

it's okay to eat the cat's food, climb the stairs, or pet the goat at the zoo," says Betty Repacholi, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Washington.

Your emotional cues don't just show your child what *not* to do. When you smile at your child and encourage her, in an excited voice, to eat a spoonful of carrots, she'll most likely take a chance on the orange mash you're feeding her.

But be careful about sending mixed messages. For instance, if you're angry about something, don't try to mask it with a cheery

tone; your facial expression is harder to control and may remain tense. "A baby may pick up on that disparity and become disoriented and upset," Repacholi says.

Help your child develop her social-referencing skills by spending lots of face-to-face time with her and naming your emotions out loud. You can say, "I'm so happy you like carrots," and smile, or look concerned while explaining, "You scared me when you climbed the baby gate!" She'll get the message.

—JEANETTE MORINGER

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