

READING SOCIAL CUES

What is this developmental skill?

Reading social cues is the ability to notice and correctly interpret other people's facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, personal space, and other nonverbal signals. These cues help children understand what others are thinking or feeling and guide them in responding appropriately during social interactions.

How does this normally develop?

Children begin reading simple emotional expressions during infancy through face-to-face interactions with caregivers. As they grow, they learn to recognize increasingly subtle emotions, understand body language, detect sarcasm or humor, and interpret the unspoken rules of social situations. Repeated, responsive interactions teach children what different expressions and behaviors usually mean.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect reduces opportunities for emotionally rich interactions. Caregivers may provide few facial expressions, little eye contact, or inconsistent emotional responses, giving children limited practice interpreting social information. Chronic stress may also cause children to become overly alert to signs of danger while overlooking cues that signal friendliness or safety.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Misinterpret neutral expressions as anger.
- Miss signs that another child wants to play.
- Fail to recognize when someone feels hurt.
- Stand too close or too far away during conversations.
- Respond in ways that seem awkward or inappropriate.
- Frequently misunderstand peers' intentions.

Parenting Implications

Rather than assuming the child "should know better," caregivers can coach social understanding by describing what they observe. Talking aloud about emotions, facial expressions, and body language helps children gradually learn to interpret social situations more accurately.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of asking, "Why can't they read the room?" ask, "Has anyone consistently helped them understand what other people's faces and behaviors mean?" Every conversation about emotions and social situations strengthens this important developmental skill.