

Developed by: Ben Riepe, Meghan von der Embse, Emily Webb, Kellie-Anne Brown Campbell, Ashley MacNish, Julia Sayles

We communicate in many ways, including words, gestures, facial expressions, eye gaze, body movements, physical touch, and sounds. From birth, infants and toddlers communicate without words, and many children continue to use these nonverbal ways to share their needs, feelings, and ideas. As adults, we often focus on spoken words and may miss opportunities for connection, comfort, or getting a need met. This resource will help caregivers notice, understand, and respond to their child's cues in supportive and meaningful ways.

This resource uses weather to help explain how children experience and express feelings. Just like the weather changes from day to day, children's emotions can change from moment to moment. Those feelings often shape how children communicate their needs, wants, and emotions. When adults learn to notice and respond to these communication cues, it can strengthen connection, comfort, and understanding.



How to Use This Resource:

We are using three weather categories to provide a general idea of what your child might be trying to communicate and how you might respond. Each category provides communication cues you can look for and ways to respond in the moment. It is important to remember that each child is an individual and they have different ways of communicating. Their mood, energy level, hunger, illness, and interests all play a role. Consider what is happening in the moment to make connections based on what your child is trying to communicate. Look for patterns in their communication cues as you learn what they need.



Clear Skies: "I am ready for connection and play. Let's keep going!"

When children provide cues in this category, their brains are ready to connect and take in new information. This is a great time to build connections by noticing your child's engagement cues and practicing new skills.



Cloudy Weather: "I am starting to feel frustrated and might need your help. Can you give me an idea?"

In this category, a storm is brewing. Children's brains are becoming overwhelmed, and they may be struggling to identify and communicate their needs. This might be a reminder to use a skill that is just right for this moment or a skill you have been practicing together.



Stormy Weather: "I'm feeling overwhelmed. I need your support and understanding. I want your calm to help me feel safe."

At this stage, children cannot access the thinking part of their brain. This means they might not be able to process new information or words and need time for their bodies to regulate (calm) before they can use the skills you have been practicing. Regulation is the ability to understand and manage feelings, energy, and behavior to respond to situations in a healthy way. Your child will need you to remain nearby, modeling deep breaths without using words, or quietly rocking or swaddling your infant. Start by checking in with yourself, "Am I calm and ready to support my child?" If not, take a minute to calm yourself before providing support.

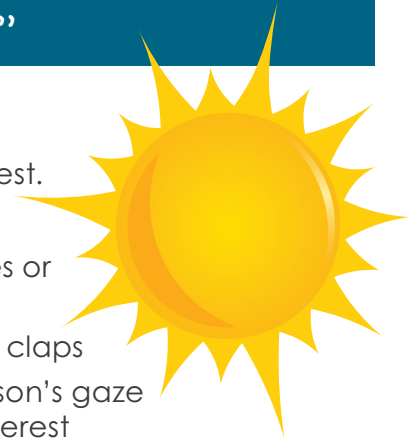
"I'm ready to connect. Let's keep going."

Communication Cues of Your Child

Facial expressions and eye gaze tell a story about a child's mood or interest.

Look for actions your child uses to connect, such as:

- Brings you an object like a book or pulls you toward something that has their attention
- Asks a question about what you are doing
- Asks you for more help, or names objects or activities of interest
- Imitates your gestures or movements
- Bounces, wiggles, or claps
- Follows another person's gaze or points to share interest



Look for indications that your child is in a positive mood, such as:

- Smiles in your direction
- Laughs
- Calm, relaxed movements
- Steady breaths
- Bounces, wiggles, or claps
- Clasps hands together (infant)
- Moves/kicks arms or legs with a smile or eye contact (infant)

I can...

Check-in:

How am I feeling?

- Am I able to be present and connect with my child?
- If not, how can I help my child to feel connected and take care of myself?

Act:

What does my child need?

- Acknowledge your child's attempt to connect (e.g., matching your child's expressions on your face, imitating their movements).
- Connect and play with your child.
- Practice regulation strategies with your child/ teach new skills (e.g., taking deep breaths, asking or signing for help, playing peek-a-boo, or imitating your child's expressions).
 - Describe your child's cues and name the feeling.
 - Narrate what your child is doing like a sportscaster (e.g., "You are smiling, and your voice is excited. It seems you like what we are doing right now.>").



*"I am starting to feel frustrated and might need your help.
Can you give me an idea?"*

Communication Cues of Your Child

Your child's actions indicate that emotions are building, such as:

- Shorter breaths
- Uses fewer words
- Watery eyes
- Yells "no" or refusal
- Stomps feet
- Avoids eye contact
- Holds head down
- Slumped shoulders/body
- Hiccups, yawns, sneezes, or automatic body responses
- Jittery or jerky movements
- Falls asleep or is sleeping
- Arches back
- Posture is stiff or limp
- Turns away, avoids eye contact, or gaze becomes unfocused
- Drops objects repeatedly without re-engaging



I can...

Check-in:

How am I feeling?

- Am I able to stay calm and supportive, or am I feeling stressed or frustrated too?
- *Remember to take a deep breath. Do I need a minute to calm myself? Do I need help from another caregiver?*

Act:

What does my child need?

- Suggest the "just right" skill (e.g., take a deep breath, identify a solution, use words).
- Describe the cues and name the feeling.
 - ▶ *"You are turning away. The noise is too much. All done."*
 - ▶ *"You're showing me that something's not right. Let's figure it out together."*
 - ▶ *"You are throwing your toys. I wonder if you are worried that we will have to stop playing soon. I will set a timer so we know when it is time to clean up."*



"I'm overwhelmed, and I need your support, understanding, and your calm to feel safe."

Communication Cues of Your Child

Your child's actions indicate emotions are taking control, such as:

- Clenches fists
- Scrunches face
- Yells
- Physical aggression
- Groans
- Cries
- Disconnected, far-off expression
- Avoids touch or close physical proximity
- Uses fewer words
- Face darkens, becomes pale, or reddens



I can...

Check-in:

How am I feeling?

- Am I able to stay calm?
- Do I need to give myself a minute before helping?
- Do I need help from another caregiver?
- Do I need to take deep breaths?
- Do I need a drink of water?

What does my child need?

- Am I asking my child to do too much right now?
- Do I think my child needs quiet and space from me while I stay close by?
- Do I think my child needs comforting with a hug?

Act:

- Check in and regulate yourself.
- Limit talking (e.g., don't give more directions or offer all the solutions in the moment).
- Co-regulate and calm down together (e.g., model taking deep breaths, sit nearby, rock or sway with your child).
- Describe the cues and name the feelings.
 - ▶ *"You are yelling and moving away. You need a moment. I can stay nearby until you're ready."*
 - ▶ *"You are crying. I've got you. Let's go sit in the rocking chair together and rock."*



[Blank version of visual for caregivers to fill in their child's individual cues]

Look for patterns in the cues your child is sending you and add details into the chart. Use the identified communication cues to make decisions about how you approach your child and find opportunities to connect.

“I’m ready to connect. Let’s keep going.”



**Communication Cues of
Your Child**

I can...

**Cues that my child is in a positive mood and
wants to connect:**

Check-in:

How am I feeling?

- Am I able to be present and connect with my child?
- If not, how can I help my child to feel connected and take care of myself?

Act:

What does my child need?

*“I am starting to feel frustrated and might need your help.
Can you give me an idea?”*

Communication Cues of
Your Child

I can...

Cues that my child's emotions are building:

Check-in:

How am I feeling?

- Am I able to stay calm and supportive, or am I feeling stressed or frustrated too?
- Remember to take a deep breath. Do I need a minute to calm myself? Do I need help from another caregiver?

Act:

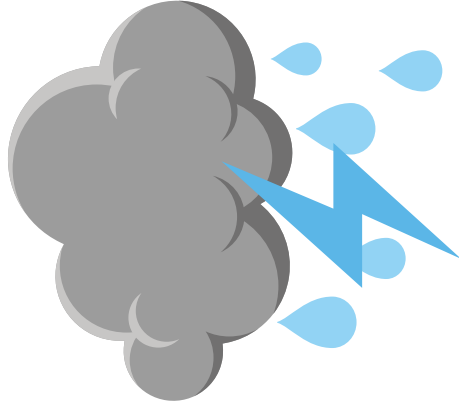
What does my child need?



“I’m overwhelmed, and I need your support, understanding, and your calm to feel safe.”

Communication Cues of
Your Child

I can...



Cues that my child's emotions are taking control:

Check-in:

How am I feeling?

- Am I able to stay calm?
- Do I need to give myself a minute before helping?
- Do I need help from another caregiver?
- Do I need to take deep breaths?
- Do I need a drink of water?

Act:

What does my child need?

- Am I asking my child to do too much right now?
- Do I think my child needs quiet and space from me while I stay close by?
- Do I think my child needs comforting with a hug?