

## **Your Moods**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

When Judy is running late and getting more tense and irritable by the minute, the one thing she can count on is one-year-old Bobby putting up a fuss.

Bobby usually is pretty easy-going. Why is it then that when Judy least needs a cranky baby, he acts up?

Chances are Bobby is picking up on his mother's crankiness or stress. Children are sensitive to the moods of those around them.

Babies often look to adults for emotional cues. When a new toy is shown to eight-to-ten-month-old babies, they often look to their mothers for some emotional signal to tell them how to react.

Like adults, babies tend to respond to happiness with happiness, to sadness with sadness, to anger with anger, and so on. Infants in a nursery may start to cry for no other reason than they hear other infants crying. It's called "crying contagion."

So it's safe to assume that your baby is sensitive to your moods, facial expressions, and tone of voice.

But you shouldn't worry that your mood swings will damage your child. Temporary "baby blues" isn't likely to have any long-term effect on your child's emotional development. Constant and severe depression, however, is a bit more serious and should be treated.

A particularly undesirable situation is if parents are always emotionally unresponsive to their child. In other words, they don't react positively or negatively to anything the baby does. Except for minimum care, they leave the infant alone, constantly.

A child's emotional development can also be affected if you are always angry, tense, or irritable. If that's the case, you should consider taking some steps to soften the impact.

Pay attention to your common and persistent emotional reactions and moods. If repeated over and over, they can have a marked influence. If, for example, you gasp in horror every time your child falls when learning to walk, your baby will likely learn to cry with every tumble. But if you smile, treat the fall as expected, comfort for a few seconds, and set your toddler off again, you'll teach your child that it's no big deal to tumble.

And if you are really feeling seriously stressed, irritable, or depressed, ask another adult to take over with your baby until you're more relaxed. When you're back to being yourself, give your baby a smile and a hug. You'll probably get one in return.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*