

Baby Face

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Riding the subway in New York City, I'm often struck by the intense eye contact I can have with a six month old I don't even know. On line in the supermarket, sitting in a restaurant, at the pediatrician's office—babies are fascinated by faces. Parents know it. Teachers know it. And children's book publishers know it too.

Science confirms our instincts. Faces interest babies, more than anything else. Mom's face is favorite, but babies will stare at photos, drawings, animal faces, the electrical outlet or even three dots set up like a face! The picture book market has responded to this fascination, and to great success—[My Face Book](#) has amazingly been translated into nine languages, including Somali and Burmese. The allure of baby faces is international.

When does the fascination begin? In the moments after birth, babies lock into their mother's face which allows them to etch her appearance into memory. In fact, during the first months the baby's vision reaches only as far as the mother's face when nursing. Babies are physically set up to focus on loved ones and this orientation has evolutionary value in keeping families together and ensuring survival.

But what's truly amazing is that even though a baby's vision isn't fully formed until four months, they have the same ability as adults to recognize faces. Babies can't discern shapes, but yet they can remember who's who. The ability to recognize themselves, however, doesn't set in until after 15 months. There's no early distinction between my face and yours. A face is simply and amazingly a social attraction.

Scientists have posed some fascinating questions about babies' interest in faces.

- Are babies biologically wired with facial recognition skills at birth?
- Do babies recognize faces because they see them more than anything else?
- If babies learn important life lessons about facial recognition moments after birth what does that reveal about the brain's immediate capacity to learn?

While we don't know all of the answers to these questions, here's 4 simple things parents can do to help build their baby's facial recognition skills—and in the process spend quality time with their child.

- 1) Allow baby to linger on your face** during feedings. Make eye contact. Enjoy the moment, because later on they will be lured towards other interests.
- 2) Make a family photo book** with faces which will help baby remember relatives.
- 3) Use mirrors**, as babies are attracted to all faces.
- 4) Share books of baby faces.** There are literally thousands of titles available. Books of baby faces can be incredibly beautiful and moving to see, especially for new parents. We recommend several great ones here.

Babies are born social and the brain is a social brain. The recent focus on social and emotional development throughout grade school addresses this learning too late. By the PreK year, a child has studied faces, the subtle shades of expression, for four full years. Parents know this in their guts. You can be your child's best first teacher by making emotions, and facial expression, part of the family curriculum.

Savor this time with your baby, as you get to know each other's one of a kind faces, engaged in a duet of remembering that which is most important of all.

Book Recommendations:

David Ellwand's [Big Book of Beautiful Babies](#)

The Global Fund for Children's [Global Babies](#)

Dan Yaccarino's [Baby Face](#)

[Illustration source.](#)