

A young child with short brown hair, wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt, is crawling on a white surface. The child is looking down and to the right with a slight smile. The background is a solid light blue color. The title 'the social life' is written in a blue, sans-serif font, arched over the top of the child's head.

the social life

by Margaret Renkl

Photographs
by Frank Heckers

of babies

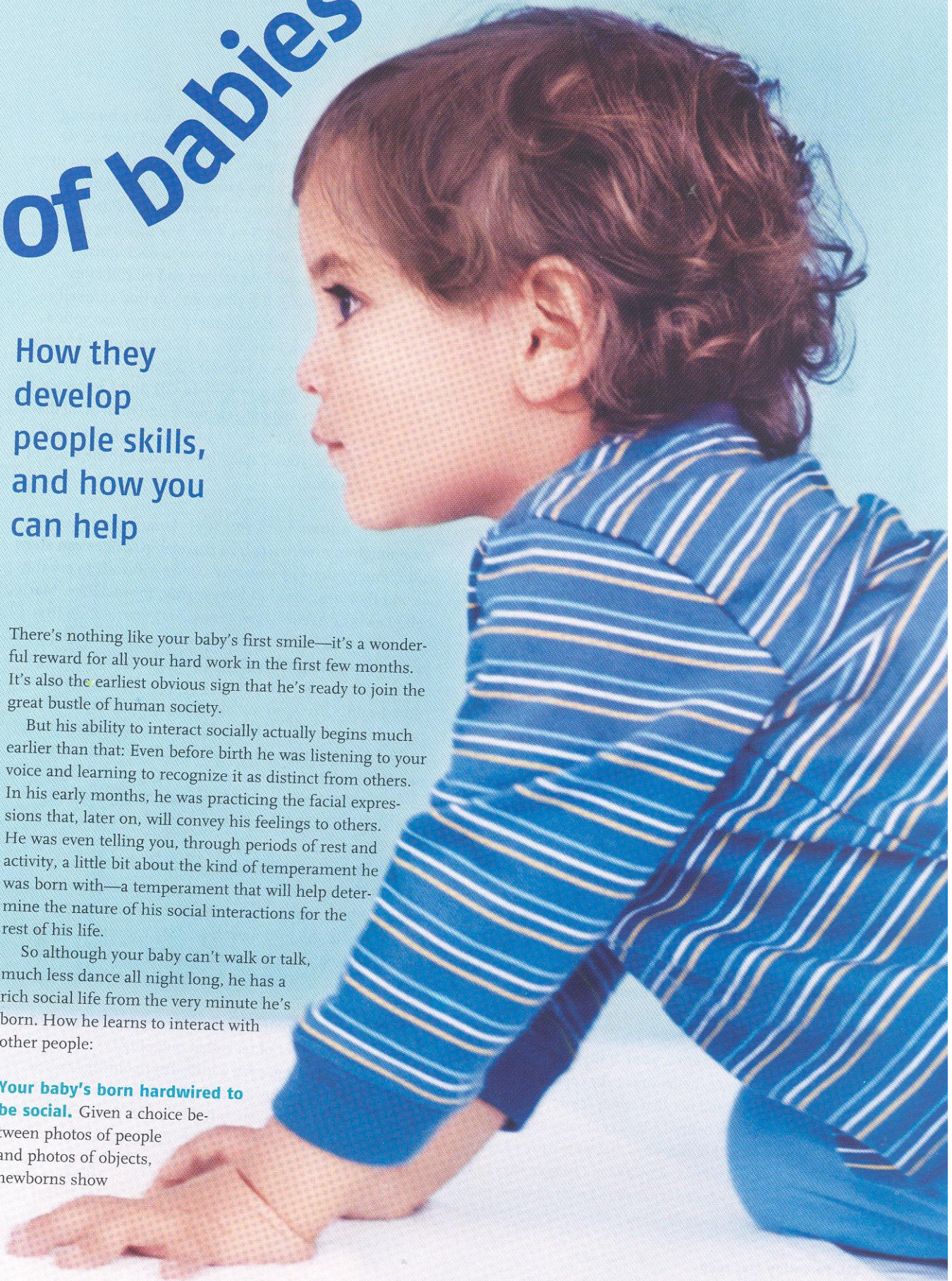
How they develop people skills, and how you can help

There's nothing like your baby's first smile—it's a wonderful reward for all your hard work in the first few months. It's also the earliest obvious sign that he's ready to join the great bustle of human society.

But his ability to interact socially actually begins much earlier than that: Even before birth he was listening to your voice and learning to recognize it as distinct from others. In his early months, he was practicing the facial expressions that, later on, will convey his feelings to others. He was even telling you, through periods of rest and activity, a little bit about the kind of temperament he was born with—a temperament that will help determine the nature of his social interactions for the rest of his life.

So although your baby can't walk or talk, much less dance all night long, he has a rich social life from the very minute he's born. How he learns to interact with other people:

Your baby's born hardwired to be social. Given a choice between photos of people and photos of objects, newborns show



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a strong preference for images of the human face, says Matthew Hertenstein, Ph.D., a professor of developmental psychology at DePauw University, in Greencastle, Indiana. At first, because their eyesight is so blurry—about 20/500—they study merely the facial outline. But around 6 weeks they shift to intense study of facial features; they're especially attracted to the eyes and mouth.

At 3 months, Farrah Williams of Mount Pleasant, Michigan, is too young to play with other kids, but she studies them endlessly: "When Farrah sees others playing on the floor, she stares really hard, with a smile on her face, and kind of leans toward them as if she wants to get down there and play, too," says mom Nikki.

By 2 months, your baby's able to distinguish the difference between basic human emotions—happiness, anger, fear, surprise—based on facial expression alone. She won't be able to understand the meaning behind these expressions for another few months, but she can tell the difference between them and react appropriately—smiling when you smile and getting upset if you don't smile in response to hers. By 6 to 8 months, she'll be much more adept at reading faces.

Your baby literally can't take her eyes off you. Her bond with you develops long before she can communicate it. One-day-olds can readily distinguish between a photo of their mother and one of a stranger by noting differences in hairline, research shows. So it's not surprising that the face your baby's most intensely interested in looking at is yours.

When my son Sam was about 2 months old, he began to spend hours studying me every day. No one else in my life, not even my husband, had ever gazed into my eyes so completely adoringly. Tired as I was, bleary-eyed and smelling of sour milk, that dotting gaze made me feel like the queen of the universe. Many moms say they didn't fall completely in love with their own babies until this lovely stage of staring into each other's eyes. It's a self-fulfilling cycle: Your baby's "rewarding" you socially, which encourages you to offer even more interaction, which makes her even more eager to socialize.

Being goofy can enhance your baby's social skills.

Peekaboo, for instance, helps your baby cope with separation anxiety by teaching her that when Mom "disappears" (behind her hands or behind a sofa cushion), she always comes right back. Other fun ways that your baby's learning:

■ **Tickling.** Alisha Thomas of Marietta, Georgia, says her daughter, Lauren, "learned what sound a bumblebee makes

because we like to take our fingers and make a buzzing sound and then say 'sting' in a high-pitched voice as we touch her to make her giggle." But she's also learning more than that from such tickling games, says Karen Singer-Freeman, associate professor of psychology at Purchase College, SUNY, in Purchase, New York. She's getting an early lesson in how humor works, and how to distinguish between serious human interactions and playful ones.

■ **Nonsense dialogue.** How often do you find yourself reacting to baby babble, responding to a happy coo with a "You're very welcome, sweetie!" or to a disgruntled "Ack!" with a sympathetic "Oh, I know it's a pain to have your diaper changed"? This pattern—you talk and I respond, then I talk and you respond—is the foundation of all dialogue. By treating your baby's "goo's" and "ga-ga's" as if they were speech, you're actually teaching her the rules of polite conversation.

Your baby knows how you feel. Long before they're old enough to experience true friendship, babies can show rudimentary signs of empathy. Many will start to cry the second they hear another baby crying, for instance. Mari-belle Lewis of Avenel, New Jersey, was startled the first time she heard her daughter Aiyannah crying in response to her baby cousin's tears. "At first I thought that maybe she cried when he cried in order to get attention. He had some health issues, so my mom, who cares for them during the day, responded to his cries quicker than to Aiyannah's. But then Aiyannah did the same thing at a mall, crying in response to a total stranger's baby's cries, so I think she's somehow communicating or sympathizing with the other babies," says Lewis.

All the world's a playmate—at first. Except for very reserved infants, most babies welcome interaction with just about anybody: the meter reader, the mailman, the slobbery puppy in the yard next door. "My wife and I are always surprised when we're out in public and, before we know it, our son, Abraham, is smiling at a total stranger, who's of course smiling right back," says Nashville dad Jonathan Marx. "Sometimes we wonder why he's so extroverted, since neither of us is that outgoing."

It can be puzzling, even a little disappointing, to see your baby flashing the same overjoyed smile at a stranger that she usually gives you, but this is just part of the fascination babies have with faces. To them, all faces are interesting, smiling ones most of all—and who doesn't smile at a baby? >>



When separation anxiety hits, your baby will cling to you—the greatest source of comfort in her life

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Luckily, there are ways to ease stranger and separation anxiety for both boys and girls. Give your baby time to adjust to a new environment, let him crawl or walk away from you instead of being plucked out of your arms, and leave him with his toys and pacifiers. He'll also feel less threatened by strangers if they stoop to his level (rather than towering above him), don't reach out to touch him right away, and don't inadvertently block his view of Mom or Dad.

A shy baby can be (gently!) nudged to be less shy.

Each baby's born with her own social style. Some are drawn to bouncy, exuberant people, while others respond better to gentle voices and quiet gestures. "We used the word 'discerning' to describe Merrill at a very early age," says Nashville mom Anna Gray Hart. "One of my best friends wanted desperately to be Merrill's adoring aunt. But even as a newborn, Merrill didn't like her. Our front door had glass panes, and when Merrill saw her bounding up the front steps, she'd immediately start crying. I felt terrible that my child never wanted to be around my best friend!"

By contrast, at 4 months, Cindy Lesser of Newington, Connecticut, says her daughter is already a social animal: "Allison only likes to be held facing outward so she can see everything going on, especially if there are a lot of kids. She even seems to flirt with the boys. She'll coo and smile, and do a little head tilt and giggle."

But while Allison Lesser will probably always welcome a happy crowd, Merrill Hart won't necessarily always dislike her mom's friend. She may befriend calmer and more deliberate people sooner than boisterous ones, but with gentle persuasion, a reserved baby can be more adaptable.

"Babies who don't enjoy new experiences may become more outgoing if they're able to learn to manage their fears," says Singer-Freeman. That means respecting your baby's choices, for one thing. If she clearly doesn't want to be held by a particular person, make an excuse to keep her in your arms. And it means encouraging social exploration in small, nurturing environments before branching out into bigger groups.

Keep playdates small at first—with only one or two other temperamentally similar babies—and choose a daycare or preschool with a small class size and one teacher. Singer-Freeman's own son found new people and experiences difficult as a baby, but, after four years in a very nurturing preschool environment, became more confident in social situations. Given a little time to ease into a new situation, even your shy baby can learn to leave her cocoon and grow to be a social butterfly. ●

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"Hey, look at me!" Babies are eager for a face-to-face

Later, only Mom or Dad will do. Around 7 months, your child's emotional development leads to a more obvious preference for Mom and Dad. This can result in both separation and stranger anxiety. Dropoffs at daycare become excruciating, Grandma suddenly gets the cold shoulder, and the stranger smiling in aisle 2 is more likely to make her cry than elicit a charmed smile.

She's starting to understand that she's a separate person, rather than an extension of you. Independence is scary at first, so she reacts by clinging closely to the greatest source of comfort in her life. Fortunately, this won't last forever. Separation anxiety peaks at 13 to 15 months, and stranger anxiety peaks even earlier—around the first birthday.

Boys may be clingier than girls. In general, baby boys are less developmentally mature, probably due to hormonal shifts during their prenatal development that cause slight delays—just enough to give females an advantage. That means boys tend to be harder to soothe when upset, make eye contact less readily, and don't like waiting when moms are slow to respond to them, says Gretchen Lovas, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. Which may explain why at 9 months Sam buried his face in my neck when I took him to work, while two colleagues who had daughters the same age passed their girls from lap to lap without a whimper.