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# UNIT 19 SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE EARLIEST RELATIONSHIPS

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## Structure

- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 The Early Interactions
  - 19.2.1 Behaviours of the Caregiver
  - 19.2.2 Abilities and Behaviours of the Infant
- 19.3 Learning to Relate - Development of Attachment
  - 19.3.1 Attachment to the Father
  - 19.3.2 Forming More Relationships
- 19.4 Learning to Trust
- 19.5 Summing Up
- 19.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## 19.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the earlier Blocks, you have read that the early years of the child's life are crucial for the physical and cognitive development of the child. Similarly, early years are also important for the child's social-emotional development.

The term 'socio-emotional' development comprises of two aspects – social and emotional. The term 'social' refers to the aspect of development concerned with human interactions (interactions with parents and others) and the term 'emotional' is concerned with the development in the person of self esteem and the basic feelings of love, fear and anger. These two aspects of development, social and emotional, generally occur together hence are studied together under the head of 'social-emotional development'.

In this Unit, we will read about the social and emotional development of the child during the early years of life. How does the infant form relationships with parents? Why is a supportive and well-adapted relationship between the child and parents important? When does the infant show an interest in other children? How does the child's relationships expand? How does the child learn to trust others and communicate her affection towards them?

### Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to:

- describe those behaviours of the caregiver and infant that promote social interaction and attachment;
- explain how the attachment bond forms between the caregiver and the infant; and
- understand why it is important for the child to develop trust in the caregivers.

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## 19.2 THE EARLY INTERACTIONS

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The newborn needs consistent care and nurturance from an adult if she is to survive. She communicates her feelings and needs to the people who look after her and, in turn, responds to their actions. The caregiver (generally the mother) and the infant need to interact with each other and develop a bond with each other. Both have built in behaviours that will help them to do so. It may seem surprising that the infant who does not even smile in the first few weeks, has social skills to interact with people. The adults too must be able to attract the baby's attention and they do so effectively. Thus the caregiver and the infant have behaviours that help them in interaction with each other and enable them to develop a bond with each other. Let us read about these behaviours in detail.



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**Caregiving behaviours promote development of emotional bond between the infant and the adult**

### 19.2.1 Behaviours of the Caregivers

Most of us display specific kinds of behaviour while interacting with infants. These behaviours usually bring forth a response from the baby. Even children as young as four years of age seem to know how to attract a baby's attention.

**Physical Contact:** Infants and older children have an inborn need for physical contact. In fact, touch is crucial for development of the emotional bond between the caregiver and the child. Babies must be held not only in the course of routine feeding, bathing and changing clothes, but also be picked up and cuddled for sheer pleasure. When the mother holds the infant in her arms, the baby feels secure. This can be seen clearly from the infant's behaviour. She may get frightened by a loud noise when alone, but remains undisturbed by a similar noise when in the arms of the mother.

**Speech:** When we talk with the infant, we tend to use 'baby talk', also referred to as 'motherese' or 'child directed speech'. This is a very specific form of speech not used with an older child, say a two year old. Baby talk has very short sentences, simple words, certain modulations of voice and nonsense sounds such as clucking noises. You must have observed that even children as young as four and five years old use baby talk with the infant. This type of utterance delights the infant and she usually responds by cooing or babbling, which makes the adults continue with their talk. As you know such an interaction helps to build an emotional bond between the infant and the caregiver.

**Smiling:** A smile initiates a social relationship. We smile when we wish to communicate warmth, acceptance and recognition. Most people smile when communicating with the infant, even if she does not smile in return. Gradually, the smile of the caregiver becomes a signal for the infant to smile back, to express delight and begin cooing and babbling.

**Facial Expressions:** Almost all adults and children while interacting with the baby exaggerate their facial expressions. Sometimes they show mock-surprise by raising the eyebrows, wrinkling the forehead, opening the mouth and smiling widely. The baby usually smiles at this expression. At other times, the adults show mock-anger or pleasure. When not wanting to communicate with the infant, they keep their expression neutral. The child learns to discriminate the various emotional expressions and to understand when the adult is intending to maintain, end or avoid a social interaction.

**Gazing:** While talking to a person we normally look at him or her. Looking away from the person may be a signal that we wish to terminate the contact. This eye-to-eye contact is the basis of all direct communication. Caregivers normally gaze at the infant while interacting with her and while taking care of her routine needs. Initially the infant may look at the mother only occasionally and is able to hold her gaze for only a few seconds. Gradually, she is able to look at her for longer periods. This mutual gazing is most important in establishing a link between the two and is one of the first forms of socio-emotional interaction.

You know that the newborn sees things most clearly at a distance of eight to ten inches from her face. The distance between the infant's eyes and the mother's face during feeding is usually about eight inches. Most of us while playing with the baby maintain this distance. Thus it seems that our natural posture and body movements help in developing an emotional bond with the baby.

**Movements and Rhythms:** When we play with an infant we nod, shake our head from side-to-side or bring it forward. These head movements serve to maintain the attention of the infant. During a game of 'peek-a-boo' with the baby, the mother hides her face behind her hands and then uncovers it again. This is one of the all-time favourite infant games played by caregivers across cultures.

Some sounds and movements that caregivers make are soothing to babies, probably because they are like the movements they experienced in the womb. You may have noticed that people in most cultures usually hold the baby on the left side. In this position the baby can feel the beat of the heart - a rhythm which she has heard in the womb — and usually calms down if she is crying. Rocking, swaying and similar rhythmic motions are also soothing to her. When the baby is soothed, it is satisfying for the mother. She feels that she is handling the infant well. This strengthens her affectionate feeling towards the child.

Thus you see how the behaviours of the adults contribute towards developing a social relationship and an emotional bond with the infant.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

- 1) List in the space provided below the six behaviours of caregivers that help in attracting the infant's attention and serve to maintain social interaction.

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- 2) Read the following statements carefully and indicate in the brackets whether they are correct or incorrect.

- a) We do not exaggerate our facial expressions while talking to the infant. ( )
- b) Rhythmic motions are not soothing to the baby. ( )
- c) Adults as well as children tend to use 'baby talk' when talking with infants. ( )
- d) Looking at the different expressions on the caregiver's face, the infant learns to discriminate various emotions and to understand when the adult is intending to maintain, end or avoid a social interaction. ( )
- e) The mutual gazing of mother and child is one of the most powerful means of establishing contact. ( )

## 19.2.2 Abilities and Behaviours of the Infant

We have just discussed how caregivers devise ways of communicating with infants. Infants also initiate behaviours to make social contact. These are gazing, crying, smiling, babbling and imitation. Let us read about the abilities and behaviours of the infant that help her to develop a relationship with people around her.

### A) Sensory Abilities

You have read about the sensory capacities of the newborn and infant in Units 5 and 6. Let us see how they help in developing social relationships.

- i) **Auditory Skills:** You know that the newborn is responsive to the human voice and can tell her mother's voice from other female voices as early as the first week of life. A crying baby often becomes calm at the sound of the parent's voice, particularly the mother's, without even being picked up. Because of this ability of the infant to attend to speech, adults use speech as a means of attracting the infant's attention successfully.
- ii) **Visual Skills:** The infant's visual skills also help her in social interaction. You know that babies like to look at the faces of people. Gazing, as you know, promotes social interaction. Gradually, the infant learns to discriminate the mother from others on the basis of her face, smell and sound and reacts differently to her than to other people. The infant's ability to recognize the parents is very important from their perspective. It makes them feel that the infant is responding to them specifically. They feel loving towards the child and this, in turn, strengthens their nurturing and care giving activities. Gradually the infant begins to recognize her grandparents, brothers and sisters and other people in the house. There is an increase in the number of people she knows.
- iii) You know that by six months of age, most infants are able to discriminate the different **emotional expressions** such as delight, anger or fear. This emerging ability of the infant is important for two reasons. Firstly, by looking at the parents' face she is able to make out their reaction to an object, event or person and this helps her to judge its value, importance and desirability. You would have seen, for example, when the infant is offered a new toy, she usually looks at the mother. If her expression conveys fear, the infant will leave the toy and move towards her. Secondly, by learning to understand facial expressions, the baby is beginning to interpret movements and expressions. One of the first tasks in social interaction is to understand what people are thinking and feeling. By discriminating among the different expressions of the face, the infant is acquiring the important skill of 'reading' people. Through her interactions in the early months, she strengthens and develops this skill further and is able to respond to subtle cues.

## B) Behaviours

Let us now read about the infant's behaviours which also play a very important role in attracting adult attention and prolonging it.

- i) **Gazing and Smiling:** You have read that when the newborn begins to fix her gaze on the face of the caregiver, a relationship develops between the two. The infant practices eye-to-eye contact from the first week of life.

We are all familiar with the sight of a newborn smiling in her sleep. This type of smile is in response to the brain's internal activity. During the first month the infant also smiles if she hears high pitched sounds. These smiles are not directed at people and are not necessarily indicators of warmth or social awareness.

It is between two and a half to three months of age that the infant begins to smile at people. Smiling, like crying, is an early means of communication. Now the smile becomes social, i.e. a human face accompanied by human voice causes the infant to smile. In the beginning, babies smile readily at the sight of all human faces — familiar or unfamiliar. Then they smile more at familiar than at strange faces. The baby's social smile accompanied by gazing is pleasing to the caregivers. They feel contented and proud and increase their protective behaviours towards her. They smile back, talk to and cuddle the infant. In fact a serious, irritable baby may not evoke the same attention from adults. When the adults smile and gaze in return to the infant's smile, it tells her that she can have an effect on people. Thus long before the baby can talk, she has discovered a means to communicate. She has learnt that a smile can get her many things — cuddles, talk, play or a toy.

- ii) **Crying:** Crying is the main way by which the infant attracts help and care. Crying brings the adult to her side more quickly than any other behaviour. Depending upon what the caregiver thinks the child needs, she may feed her, change her dress or pick her up.

Early in life, babies cry mainly when they are hungry or wet or in pain. Later, by about six months of age, the infant uses crying as a means of directing the adults' attention to her even when she is not in distress. She cries because she is bored and wants to be picked up or talked to. Thus she uses crying to elicit a social response from the caregivers. By one year, the total amount of crying decreases by almost fifty per cent of what it was at three months. This gives the infant and parents more time for positive social behaviour such as gazing, smiling, babbling and imitation. Responding to the infant's cry is important because it helps to foster a feeling of trust in her. The child feels sure that if she is in distress somebody will come to her. This helps her to develop a sense of trust. Parents who are sensitive and responsive to the child's crying have children who cry less. You will read more about the development of trust in the latter part of this Unit.

- iii) **Cooing and Babbling:** Once the infant begins to coo and babble, the interaction between her and the people increases dramatically. When the baby imitates sounds, it makes adults around her want to play with her and talk to her. These ‘dialogues’ between the adult and the newborn become more varied.
- iv) **Imitation:** Around one year of age, infants also imitate certain other behaviours. They may copy blinking of the eyes, certain rocking movements of the body or other gestures. When the infant mimics or copies an action, the adult produces more behaviours that the infant can imitate, thus prolonging the social interaction. Such social interactions are natural as well as healthy for the infant’s socio-emotional development. The infant is likely to imitate those with whom she has formed an emotional attachment.

**The above discussion indicates that the child is prepared from birth onwards for relating to people.** Communicating with people gives the infant a chance to practice and refine social skills she already has and to develop new ones. After having read this section, can you identify the social skills the infant displays? They are turn-taking, smiling, recognizing people and understanding the meaning of facial expressions and body movements. These social skills develop further as the child grows and interacts with more people.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Answer the following questions briefly in the space provided below.
  - a) How do the infant’s sensory abilities aid in social interaction and help her to form a bond with caregivers?  
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  - b) List the social skills that the infant acquires and refines during the first year of life.  
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  - c) How does being able to discriminate the different emotional expressions on the caregiver’s face help the child?  
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- 2) Read the following statements carefully and write in the brackets whether they are correct or incorrect:
- a) When the infant gazes at the mother, the latter feels strongly affectionate towards the child and this strengthens the emotional bond between them. ( )
  - b) It is not important to respond to the child's cry. ( )
  - c) The social smile emerges at one month of age. ( )
  - d) The infant's smile accompanied with her gazing is very effective in maintaining contact with adults and in promoting social interaction. ( )
  - e) The infant's babbling and her ability to imitate usually bring forth a response from adults. ( )

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### 19.3 LEARNING TO RELATE – DEVELOPMENT OF ATTACHMENT

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In the earlier section, we have spoken about the behaviours and the abilities of the infant and the caregivers that help them in interacting with each other. But how does a relationship between the infant and the caregiver actually develop from day to day? Let us read about this aspect now.



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**Fulfilment of physical needs and social stimulation provided by the mother leads to the development of the attachment bond between the mother and the infant**

**From the first time the mother holds the baby and gazes at her, a communication begins between the two.** In fact, it is believed that an initial bond may be formed between them in the first few hours after birth, since



many newborns are alert and can make eye contact in this period. It is generally recommended that the baby be given to the mother immediately after birth. This gives a sense of well-being and security to the newborn. **Subsequently, during the caregiving activities of feeding, bathing and putting the baby to sleep, their relationship strengthens. But what is it about these caregiving activities that promote attachment?** Let us look at the interaction during a typical feeding situation to understand this.

When the baby is hungry, the mother picks her up and feeds her. The infant feels the touch of the mother's body and hears her voice. Before and after feeding, the mother talks to the baby, plays with her and tickles her. Thus along with satisfying the infant's hunger, the mother also provides physical contact and social stimulation (by smiling, talking and playing) which is the basis for developing mutual affection. Through similar interactions every day, an affectional bond, called attachment, forms between them. Attachment is an emotional bond between two people and in this case, refers to the bond between the mother and the infant. Infants become attached to people who take care of them. In most cases it is the mother who primarily looks after the baby and the infant usually becomes attached to her. This is the infant's first social relationship.

If the feeding situation is not warm and pleasant, attachment to the caregiver may not occur. If the mother is tense, holds the baby awkwardly or handles her roughly, the baby will associate discomfort with the mother's presence. When such painful experiences occur often, the infant may become anxious during feeding time. If other experiences of the baby with the mother are also not happy, she will become irritable. You have read about children living in institutions. Their physical needs are generally fulfilled but emotional interaction with adults is missing. You know that in such cases children are not able to form attachments. Thus we see that **attachment is a two-way** process and the behaviour of both the infant and the caregivers contribute towards it.

At this juncture it is important to re-emphasize one point. The infant does not form an attachment with the mother simply because the mother fulfills her physical needs of hunger and care. More important than this is the aspect of close physical contact with the mother and the social stimulation during the fulfillment of infant's physical needs that creates an emotional bond between them. Parents who consistently (without fail) respond in a loving and nurturing manner to the child seem to make the child feel emotionally secure. Such parents are warm in handling babies — they smile more often, touch the infant lovingly and use their voices in expressive ways. In contrast, when caregivers avoid the baby, do not initiate physical contact and are inconsistent in their response (at times loving and at times avoidant), the child does not form a secure attachment.

**How do we know that an attachment exists between the infant and the adult?** Infants show their attachment to people by seeking their attention and by trying to gain their approval and affection. They become upset when separated from those they love. They approach these adults for comfort when distressed and are soothed by them. Infants also look at these people for

encouragement, smile more at them and explore their surroundings confidently when these people are present. In a new situation or when confronted with a new object, the child first looks at the adult with whom she has developed attachment, to see how she is reacting, i.e. she uses this person for clues about a new situation. A secure infant smiles more, cries less, is ready to explore and does not cling to the mother fearfully all the time.

### 19.3.1 Attachment to the Father

In the Unit while describing the emotional relationships, we have spoken mostly about the mother. In general, the mother is usually the primary caregiver and is the most important person in the infant's life. But what about the father?

**The father also has an equally important role to play. He is just as capable of caring for the baby as the mother (except for breastfeeding) - he can be just as nurturing, responsive and sensitive.** If the father interacts with the baby right from the birth and spends time playing with her and looking after her, the baby develops strong emotional bonds with the father as well. What about the families where the mother is working and is out of the home for a long time?



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Research has shown that it is not the amount of time spent with the infant that helps in the formation of attachment, but what the adults do with the child during the time they spend with her. You would have seen that though the fathers and working mothers spend less time with the infant, the infant wants to be with the mother and father when they are present. Thus, it is the quality of time which the caregivers and the infants spend together that determine caregiver-child attachment and not the number of hours spent together. When infants receive love and nurturance as well as social stimulation from the caregivers, they become attached to them.

### 19.3.2 Forming More Relationships

After this first strong bond with one or two persons, the infant gradually forms more relationships. How do you think the child's relationships with others develop after the first year? You may like to note some points before you read about this aspect.

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By the end of the first year, she forms emotional bonds with other people in the family who play an important role in caring for her such as grandparents, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles. If there are children around, those a few years older, than the infant will get along with her much better than those close to her age. The older ones will be tolerant of her, while her age-mates would be unable to play cooperatively. Older children play with the infant readily and seek delight in doing simple caregiving activities.



**Encouragement from the older brother motivates the infant and strengthens their bond**

If the child goes to a day care centre, she may develop a bond with the adult who takes care of her, plays and talks with her consistently. The child may get attached to other people as well such as neighbours or household helpers, if she gets love, care, affection and stimulation from them consistently. Hence, it can be safely said that the child gets attached to all those people around her who provide her with love, care, affection and social stimulation (play, talk). However, the strength of the child's attachment varies from person to person. She will be more attached to some than to others. When the infant receives nurturant care from several caregivers apart from the parents, she also learns to trust other people early in life. Socially she has a wider sphere of familiar individuals and this has a beneficial influence on her social development.



Two is fun! Bonding with the elder sister

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## 19.4 LEARNING TO TRUST

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The reason why we have spoken about attachment in detail is that it is important for the infant to form a secure attachment with the primary caregiver. **When the child experiences affection consistently, she develops a feeling of trust. Developing trust and a sense of security is important since it influences the child's later behaviour to a considerable extent.** Let us see how.

**Firstly, an infant who has experienced a warm relationship with her caregiver in the first year of life, is likely to view other adults she comes in contact with later as safe and friendly.** Such a child finds it pleasurable to interact with people and forms emotional ties with them. Research has shown that securely attached infants are more social during preschool years and are more popular with peers. In contrast, an infant who is unable to form a secure attachment with the mother in the first year of life begins to mistrust people. Since her first relationship has not been a rewarding one, she may feel that other adults will also cause her distress. The feeling of mistrust in the primary caregiver generalizes to other adults. Research has shown that

when children did not experience normal love and affection in the first few years, particularly in the first year of life, they withdrew from social interactions, found it difficult to relate to people and sometimes were unable to form emotional ties at all. Of course, a person needs to form close relationships throughout life, but the relationship with the primary caregiver is particularly important. It has also been observed that infants with secure attachment have higher self-esteem and show less aggressive behavior during preschool years. They also show more empathy towards other adults and children. Secure or insecure attachment thus has long-term impact on the child's personality.



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**A warm relationship helps the infant to develop trust**

**While there is a link between early experiences and later behaviour, but there are individual differences in how children are affected by early experiences.** Some children may be more affected than others by the lack of love in early years. However, human beings are resilient, i.e. they can recover from unpleasant experiences or deprivations. It may happen that an infant

abandoned early in life may find people who show consistent warmth and care for her later on. In such a case, the negative effects of lack of love and warmth in the earliest months may be mitigated (reduced) to a large extent and there may be no long lasting harm to the child's personality.

**Secondly, developing trust influences the child's exploratory behaviour and the quality of play.** We are all familiar with the sight of an infant moving towards an unfamiliar object. She picks it up, examines it and takes it back to show it to her mother. But this exploration requires considerable courage. The infant has to move some distance away from the mother and it is possible that the new object can cause harm. She is aware of this but she still moves towards it because she trusts the mother and uses her as a 'safe base' from where to explore the world. Infants who feel secure will play away from the mother, glancing at her once in a while to make sure she is still there. Later, they will go into another room or into the open, away from her physical presence and explore. On the other hand, the infant who has not developed trust feels insecure and is fearful of new situations and events. When the mother is not consistent in her care of the child, the child is not sure whether she will come to her help. She does not explore, or venture or try out new things; instead she clings to the mother. This limits her range of learning.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) Read the following statements carefully. Each of them is incomplete. Along with each statement two or three choices have been given, of which one is most appropriate. Tick the appropriate answer to each statement.
  - i) Attachment between the mother and the infant forms as a result of
    - a) feeding the baby, bathing her and looking after her other physical needs.
    - b) talking, smiling, gazing, playing and holding the baby as well as fulfilling her physical needs.
  - ii) If the mother is tense while feeding the baby, holds her awkwardly or handles her roughly.
    - a) the infant will connect comfort with the mother's presence and form an attachment to her.
    - b) the infant would connect discomfort with the mother's presence and would become anxious and irritable.
  - iii) When the infant becomes attached to a caregiver she
    - a) becomes happy when she is separated from the caregiver.
    - b) explores the surroundings confidently when the caregiver is around.
    - c) does not smile at the caregiver and does not seek her affection.
  - iv) Receiving nurturant care from several caregivers apart from the parents may have

- a) a harmful influence on the infant's social development.
  - b) no influence on the infant's social development.
  - c) a beneficial influence on the infant's social development.
- v) An infant who does not form a secure attachment with the primary caregiver
- a) finds it pleasurable to interact with people.
  - b) learns to trust people.
  - c) may feel that all adults are to be avoided and withdraws from social interaction.

2) What do you understand by the term 'attachment'?

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3) Why is it important for the infant to develop a feeling of trust in the primary caregiver?

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## 19.8 SUMMING UP

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In this Unit, you have read how the infant forms relationships with people in the first year of life. Both the infant and the adults have behaviours that facilitate their interaction with her and help to form the bond of attachment.

Through daily interactions during feeding, bathing, playing and talking, an emotional bond forms between the mother and the child. This attachment of the infant to her primary caregiver is her first emotional relationship and it has an important role to play in the child's personality development.

Towards the end of the first year, the child begins to form attachments with other people who interact daily with her such as brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles and aunts.

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## 19.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) The six behaviours are: speech, smiling, gazing, facial expressions, movements and rhythms, physical contact.

- 2) a) Incorrect. We do exaggerate our facial expressions while talking with the infant.
- b) Incorrect. Rhythmic motions are very soothing to the baby.
- c) Correct
- d) Correct
- e) Correct

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) a) The following aspects show that the infant's sensory capacities help her in social interaction. Infants are responsive to human voices. They prefer to hear speech over any other sound. They prefer to look at faces of people and gaze at them. Gradually infants recognize caregivers which strengthens the emotional bond between them. They are able to discriminate facial expressions and can take turns, which are skills important for social interaction.
  - b) The social skills are: gazing, smiling, imitating, recognizing people, understanding the meaning of facial expressions and body movements, turn-taking.
  - c) Firstly, this enables the infant to check how the adults are reacting to a new object, event or a person and helps her to judge its value and importance. Secondly, she learns that body movements and expressions convey what the person is feeling.
- 2) a) Correct
  - b) Incorrect. It is important to respond to the child's cry.
  - c) Incorrect. The social smile emerges around three months of age.
  - d) Correct
  - e) Correct

### Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) i) (b)
  - ii) (b)
  - iii) (b)
  - iv) (c)
  - v) (c)
- 2) Attachment refers to the emotional bond between two people, and in this case, between the caregiver and the child.
  - 3) Developing trust is important for two reasons. Firstly, an infant who feels secure is willing to explore. Secondly, she feels that other adults can be trusted and is willing to form relationships with them.