



Supporting Theory of Mind (ToM) Development

Using language about thinking and feeling in your daily interactions can help your child develop vocabulary for their own thoughts and emotions while looking beyond actions to understand the thoughts, emotions and motivations of others. Here are some tips for supporting your child's development of Theory of Mind (ToM) from day one:

Age	ToM Developmental Timeline	What You Can Do to Support ToM
0-6 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has preference for faces• Imitates facial expressions• Quiets in response to caregiver• Demonstrates vocal turn-taking• Responds to others' emotions	<p>Stay close. Hold your baby and talk, sing and smile.</p> <p>Enjoy conversations. While holding your baby, talk about their smiles and coos and wait for them to take another turn.</p>
6-12 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follows caregiver attention to an object• Attends to and imitates pitch and duration of caregiver's voice• Calls to get attention• Develops joint attention• Begins expressing wants and needs by vocalizing while pulling, pushing or gesturing	<p>Describe your baby's thought bubble. Put words to your baby's thoughts and emotions: "I think you're sad because mom left the room."</p> <p>Put words to your joint thought bubble. If your baby looks to you after hearing or seeing something (joint attention), talk about how you both are hearing and thinking about the same thing. "I heard something too. I think it was a dog."</p>
12-18 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Points to request an object or more information• Begins using words to communicate• Initiates familiar routines and games• Shows separation anxiety• Demonstrates object permanence (knows a covered object is still there)	<p>Reinforce and expand your child's pointing and communication attempts. "You're right! You see the bus. Just like the bus in your book."</p> <p>Play, play, play! Children develop thinking language through play time with you. You can integrate play into every routine (put their favorite toys in the fridge and ask "what was your monkey thinking when he went into the fridge?")</p>
18-24 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Begins to read the communicative intentions of others• Develops symbolic use of objects in pretend play• Begins to describe their feelings, wants and desires	<p>Use "thinking" language. Think aloud (I...wonder, think, know, imagine, forgot, remember) during play and routines.</p> <p>Describe "wants" and feelings of others. If you and your child witness another child having a tantrum at the store. Use this opportunity to explain what the other child wants.</p>



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24-30 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Announces intentions• Uses language to express own preferences (like/don't like)• Uses words to express emotion• Begins using state of mind vocabulary (mad, scared, sad)	<p>Use states of mind vocabulary. When reading books, talk about what characters are thinking and feeling. Use animated voices for states of mind such as scared, angry, cheerful, shy, etc.</p> <p>Take time to name and discuss emotional responses of others. "Your friend is upset because you took his car."</p>
30-36 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attempts to control situations verbally• Begins to understand the distinction between thinking and knowing• Begins to tell about a past event• Imaginatively role plays with peers	<p>Discuss how you "know" things. "I know dad's home because I heard the car."</p> <p>Talk through past events. Use an experience book to help your child talk about past events. Discuss different perspectives.</p> <p>Model and engage in pretend play. Role play familiar experiences with your child (such as visiting the doctor, going to the grocery store or flying on an airplane) to encourage practicing different perspectives.</p>
36-42 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engages in longer conversations (4-5 turns)• Explains how they 'know' something by using 'because'• Uses polite language (please, thank you)• Increases perspective taking in role play	<p>Encourage describing others' thought bubbles. When reading a book ask "I wonder what he's thinking?"</p> <p>Help create mental images by playing the "I'm Thinking" game. Start by saying something like "I'm thinking of an animal who looks like a horse and has black and white stripes."</p> <p>Model perspective taking. Use books to identify what different characters are thinking, believing and feeling.</p> <p>Request clarification. In conversation, make confused facial expressions and ask questions.</p>



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Age	ToM Developmental Timeline	What You Can Do to Support ToM
42-48 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assumes the role of another person in play• Has long, detailed conversations• Uses variety of ‘thinking’ words in conversation (think, know, forgot, wonder, remember) when talking about others• Retells a short sequence of past events to a listener	<p>Facilitate pretend play with peers. When reading books, talk about what characters are thinking and feeling. Use animated voices for states of mind such as scared, angry, cheerful, shy, etc.</p> <p>Encourage context. Model and encourage starting conversations with context. “Guess where I went?” (Focus on the W’s--Who, What, Where) “I went to the aquarium with mom and dad.”</p> <p>Invent stories or talk through a past event. Tell the stories and events through different perspectives.</p>
48-60 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can understand that others can make decisions on what they believe to be true and not what is visually apparent (false belief)• Attends to understanding of conversation partner (adjusts information, asks questions, offers clarification)• Explains how they ‘know’ the perspectives of others• Develops sense of humor• Understands and tells jokes or riddles	<p>Use sabotage. Put crackers in the cookie box, put your child’s clothes in dad’s dresser. Talk about what dad thought was in the dresser.</p> <p>Encourage your child to explain how they “know.” Watch the Denver the Dog video and discuss with your child how they know Denver ate the kitty treats.</p> <p>Identify good and bad examples of ToM. Discuss situations in books or movies that reflect good and bad examples of characters understanding the thoughts or emotions of others.</p>

Developmental Milestones compiled from the following sources:

Estabrooks, W., MacIver-Lux, K., Rhoads, E.A., (2016). *Auditory-verbal therapy: For young children with hearing loss and their families, and the practitioners who guide them*. San Diego, CA, Plural Publishing.

Moeller, M. P., & Schick, B. (2005). [Development of social understanding in children with hearing loss: Implications for audiologists](#). In *A sound foundation through early amplification: Proceedings of the third international conference* (pp. 209-228).

Wilkes, E (1999), *Cottage acquisition scales for listening, language and speech--Simple Sentence Level*. San Antonio, TX. Sunshine Cottage School for Deaf Children.