Stages of Tuning In

The ability to understand other people doesn’t happen all at once. It takes about six years for most children, beginning in the first year of life, to become completely tuned in to other people. Your child might take eight or ten years, or even longer. It may be something he always has to work extra hard at. But no matter how many years it takes him, your child’s understanding of others will pass through a series of five stages. These stages are the same ones, more or less, that every child must go through. Knowing what they are will give you an idea of what your child needs to learn to progress to the next stage.

Stage 1: Understanding wanting

Every child’s first lesson about wanting is that other people sometimes want things that are different from what he wants. Toddlers learn this simple truth when their desires conflict with those of their parents. (For instance, they want to eat candy and their parents won’t let them.)

Sometime after a child has begun to understand what other people want, he can start predicting their actions and feelings. Then he can use this information to figure out how to react to them.

In Chapter 2, you read about all the things a child can do when he learns to read people’s faces and body language. He can understand how people feel. He can understand the meaning behind words people say. He can predict what people will do. And he can respond sensitively to people, based on their messages.

But useful as these skills are, they’re limited without the basic insights and vocabulary that let us really tune in to others. Read on to learn how to help your child take his first steps in this direction.

Liam is starting to tune in to what’s going on in his big brother’s mind. He isn’t sure whether he should believe him because he knows how his mother feels about watching TV, and he knows how much his brother wants to watch TV.

Do you like pink?

You like pink.

I like blue.

No, I don’t! I like blue!

Thinking everyone likes the same things you do causes problems in relationships.