Understanding That “You” and “I” Think Differently

To really appreciate the thoughts of others, your child has to see the difference between himself and someone else. In other words, he has to understand that there are two sides to every story. Two people don’t always want the same things, know the same things or hold the same opinions. Children must understand this before they can begin to grasp what’s going on in the minds of others.

The ability to understand that other people’s thoughts and feelings differ from our own is sometimes called “theory of mind.” We call it a theory because no person can ever know exactly what’s going on in someone else’s head.

Many common English expressions describe this basic ability. “Tuning in” to others is just one. “Being on the same page,” “standing in someone else’s shoes,” “reading a person’s mind” and “he knows me like a book” are a few more.

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.

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.

A child who has reached Stage 1 has learned these ideas (usually in the order shown):

- Different people want different things.
- To get what they want, people act in different ways.
- When people get what they want, they feel happy.
- When people don’t get what they want, they feel unhappy.

In Stage 1, a child understands and talks about what people want.