

Brain Wonders: Nurturing Healthy Brain Development From Birth

The first 3 years of a child's life are uniquely important, because this is the most sensitive period for brain development. The experiences a child has during this time will shape the architecture of her brain and build the connections that allow her to develop important lifelong skills, like problem-solving, communication, self-control, and relationship-building.

New brain connections are forming at a rate of 700 every second in response to the baby's experiences out in the world. These connections help babies learn the essentials to survive—and thrive—within their family, community, and culture. It's the quality of a baby's relationships that has a major influence on which brain connections take place and the strength of these connections. This means that early experiences matter.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Make your baby feel safe and secure in the world.** Tune in to her signals—her facial expressions, actions, and sounds or words—and respond in ways that make her feel understood and respect her individual needs. This allows her to feel safe to explore her world and make positive, strong connections to others which will support healthy brain development.
- **Establish routines.** Young children thrive on predictability—knowing what to expect. It helps them feel safe and secure, and it helps them learn to anticipate what will come next. This sense of predictability also helps them understand sequences and patterns as they grow, which are important for learning language, literacy, and math skills.
- **Engage in back-and-forth interactions.** It's like a game of catch; it's all about back-and-forth. One of you starts the interaction, the other responds. You talk to your baby, then give him time to respond with sounds, words, or actions. Then you answer back. Your baby points to an object, you notice and comment on it, and then help him get it so he can explore it. It's a dialogue, and it teaches your child that he is important and that his interests are recognized and valued. This builds strong language, thinking, and social-emotional skills which all build strong, healthy brains.
- **Don't fear "positive stressors"—they build strong brains.** Positive stress is brought on by the everyday challenges young children face, like figuring out a difficult puzzle or learning to adapt to a new child care center or other new experience. Giving your child the time, space, and support to work through these challenges will allow her to master new skills, get along with others, and ultimately succeed in work, school, and life.
- **See yourself as a coach, not a fixer.** Children learn through trial and error. Failure is part of learning. Your job is not to solve the problem your child is facing, but to help him develop the problem-solving skills that will help him feel confident to master the many challenges he will face as he grows. Offer ideas and suggestions, but don't take over. Step in only when it's necessary; for example, rather than doing the puzzle for your child when he gets frustrated, you might guide your child to try out different spaces to discover where the pieces fit. This process builds brain power and the motivation to learn.
- **Provide opportunities to explore and play with interesting and challenging materials.** Offer young toddlers objects (such as blocks, simple puzzles, water and sand play, nesting toys, and child-size pots and pans) that encourage them to use their thinking skills to figure out how things work and that promote social interaction, too.

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- **Tune in to the skills your child is working on and encourage her to take the next step.** If your toddler is building towers, you might suggest that the structure could also be a home for her stuffed animals, building her imagination.
- **Encourage repetition.** Young children master new skills by doing things over and over again. They might want to read the same book night after night, do and undo a puzzle, or play peek-a-boo dozens of times in a row. Their brains are working hard to problem-solve, figuring out how the object or game works. Repetition is the key to mastery.
- **Resist pressure to “teach” toddlers specific academic skills such as colors and shapes.** Children learn these concepts through their everyday play and interactions with you. You can teach about colors and numbers as you talk about the green and red apples and then count them as you place them in the bag. Children learn about shapes as you point out triangular versus square street signs, or the shapes of the different blocks they are using to build with you. Young children learn best through experience.