

Development From Birth to 12 Months Old: Forming a Trusting Bond to Nurture Learning

In the first year of life, babies move from being completely dependent on parents and primary caregivers to becoming active explorers, clear communicators, and intensely social beings. Their thinking, language, social-emotional, and physical skills develop through back-and-forth interaction and play. These domains of development all work together to help children learn and grow.

What does this look like in “real-life”? Picture a 9-month-old reaching her arms up when her dad walks into the room. She has an idea (thinking) that she wants to be picked up by her dad, whom she wants to be close to (social-emotional). She shares this idea (communication) by raising her arms (physical) to let her father know what she is thinking and feeling. In just one very ordinary and brief interaction, this baby is using a range of skills and abilities to effectively communicate her thoughts and feelings. And this is just one of thousands of ordinary moments in a baby’s life that are actually quite extraordinary. Watch your baby carefully and you will see all of these wheels turning—a process which leads to amazing growth and development across 12 short months.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Respond to your baby’s signals.** Look for patterns in her cries and actions. This gives you clues as to what she is thinking, feeling, and needs from you. When her eyes are bright and she is awake and alert, it is time to play. Slow things down when she cries, turns away, or arches her back.
- **Talk with your baby.** Talk about what you are doing together. “You’re looking at the teddy bear. Yes, it’s fuzzy and has great big eyes.” Remember to pause to give your baby time to respond—which may be just eye contact, or sometimes a sound or a gesture with his arms or legs. This makes him feel loved and helps him bond with you. It also builds his communication skills.
- **Narrate your baby’s actions.** Help your baby begin to learn language by putting her facial expressions, sounds, and gestures into words. “I see you looking at that toy. It is so interesting. Let’s see what it can do.”
- **Have back-and-forth “conversations” with your baby.** When you reply to her babbles, she knows you care about what she is saying. This helps her learn to talk.
- **Build your baby’s curiosity.** Offer your child a range of objects to explore—a rattle to shake, a ball to roll or toss, or a pot and wooden spoon to bang. These activities help children learn how things work. They also build the muscles in children’s hands that will help them learn to write.
- **Share books with your baby.** Choose books with simple, large pictures or designs with bright colors. Stiff cardboard, “chunky” books, books made of cloth, or soft vinyl books that can be easily washed are great for babies.
- **Play back-and-forth games.** Babies love to hand objects to you and then have you hand them back. This is a great way to learn give-and-take.
- **Play disappearing and reappearing games,** such as peek-a-boo. Have her find an object that you have hidden under a cloth, table, etc. Or, drop an object and encourage your baby to look for it. This helps her learn that things exist even though she can’t see them.
- **Help your baby learn new skills** by tuning in to what he is capable of doing right now and identifying what the next step in his skill development might be. If he is banging two blocks together, see if he’d like to try stacking them.