

The Daily Parent

A NEWSLETTER FOR WORKING PARENTS

HELPING YOUR CHILD MAKE CONNECTIONS: Make the Most of the Brain Gain

Babies are born with their brains ready and waiting to build up a series of “connections” as they learn and experience life. This building of connections in the brain continues throughout life, but researchers have discovered a fascinating piece of new information. The human brain grows fastest when we are very young. By the age of five, children’s brains are at 90 percent of their potential growth. A huge amount of brain-building has taken place in just a few short years!



opportunity.” Like other milestones in young children’s lives, including learning to walk, talk, and play with others, these “critical periods” are thought to be the best times for certain senses and skills to develop normally. Early experiences definitely play a key role in school success.

As a parent, you are surely doing a lot of nurturing, which is a big part of what is needed to make the most impact on developing key skills. As you touch, hold, look at, rock, talk to, read to, and sing to your baby and toddlers, you are developing connections in the brain that will form the basic foundation of how they feel about themselves and how they relate to others and the world around them.

Brain Development and Its Importance

So why is it important that you know about your child’s brain development? What does it mean for you as a parent? Young children are going through a tremendous amount of growth in a very short period of time. Some very exciting and critical changes are happening in the brain that can have a long-term effect on a child.

Researchers call specific timeframes for the developing brain during the first five to six years of life the “critical periods,” “prime times,” or “windows of

What Do Children Need?

While it is important to be aware of early brain development, it is also necessary to not over-worry about it. Remember that children are born with the ability to learn. Many skills are not taught. For example, you cannot teach a child to talk. However, you do provide the experiences that encourage and support natural language development.

If your child is in child care, work with your provider to ensure that he or she is receiving the kind of care that will provide the types of experiences that will encourage exploration and growth. Talk about those experiences that your child care provider has available in her program, and include them at home as well.

So, what are some things that parents and child care providers can do to make the most of the fast learn-

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ing and developing that goes on in the brain during these early years? Here are some suggestions:

Age Groups and What To Do

BABIES

- **Feed them a variety of nutritious foods**, with your doctor’s supervision. Good nutrition is important to developing bodies and brains. (Some nutritious foods include formula or breast milk, vegetables, fruits, and grains.)
- **Hold them—often.** Every time you touch, hold, have eye contact, and embrace your child, you are helping to build connections in the brain.
- **Talk with them.** Language is the most natural way to engage and connect with children, and it plays a significant role in brain development. Read to, sing to, have a conversation with your child. Communicate without speaking—play “peek-a-boo,” repeat any sounds your baby makes. Sing lullabies and recite rhymes. Talk about what you are doing with the child—dressing, bathing, taking a walk. All this builds connections.
- **Read to them.** Early and often. Babies learn to read and write from hearing language over and over.

There are many books to read to infants; and ones that are safe for them to chew on and handle.

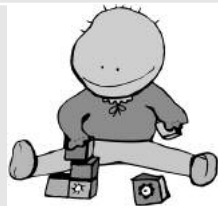
- **Respond to their communications.** When your baby cries or coos, he is trying to get your attention. When your baby cries, look at him, pick him up, hold up, feed him, or change his diaper. Spoiling a baby is not a concern at a very young age. Having him know that you will attend to his needs and that he can rely on you is important.
- **Give them consistency.** A home with reliable and consistent, loving care helps babies build trust and a sense of security that promotes healthy emotions.

TODDLERS

- **Talk with them.** Help promote their language use by asking them questions: “Which cereal would you like to eat?”, and by giving them one-step directions: “Open your book.” Finger plays (like Itsy Bitsy Spider) are a great way to have fun while supporting language development.
- **Move and have fun listening to music with them.** Movement helps build body awareness and makes connections in the brain as well. Have fun with toddlers by marching or dancing to fun songs, or

What is Happening During Early Brain Development

Development of the Senses

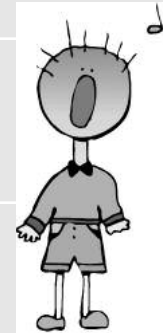


Why It's Important

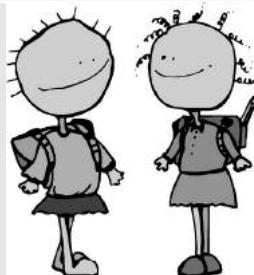
Children’s senses develop, including their ability to have clear and coordinated eyesight; their hearing; as well as their sense of touch. The correct development of the senses of sight, touch, taste, and smell are the groundwork for other brain processes.

Development of Language and Communication Skills

Children’s ability to learn language is stimulated and developed during the very early years through interaction, such as being talked and read to.



Development of Social and Emotional Skills



Children develop social attachments to the people in their lives and learn to trust, feel safe, and have control over their emotions. This is the groundwork for the ability to be caring towards others.

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while playing with homemade or inexpensive instruments.

- **Read with them.** Toddlers can participate in reading with you as you read their favorite bedtime stories or lullabies. Involve them in the reading by asking them questions: “Do you think he will find his mother?” Make reading a part of your child’s daily routine.
- **Involve them in more activities.** Have your toddler help you with the laundry, by putting all the socks in one pile, for example. Make some cookies or prepare simple treats with your toddler at hand, giving him a small job to do.
- **Let them explore.** Toddlers and mobile infants should be given the opportunity to safely explore their world. This is how babies and toddlers learn—through touch, taste, sound, smell. Give them a variety of materials—books, toys, and so on—that will encourage their interest in the world around them.



OLDER CHILDREN

- **Talk with them.** Older children’s language skills are developing at a fast rate. Basic language skills continue to expand through ages 8 and 9. As your child becomes a preschooler, and school-ager, you can ask your child more open-ended questions: “What do you think will happen next in the story?”
- **Do more with reading and writing.** Surround your child with a variety of print and art materials, like books, newspapers, and magazines. Making letters and words a daily part of your child’s life helps her get ready for reading.
- **Help them make friends.** Around preschool age, children are just beginning to learn to share and play with other children. Social skills take practice and direction. Help your child by encouraging him to play with others. Don’t expect young children to be ready to “share” everything. Play dates with other children in small time-frames work well.

As your child gets older, all of the activities and experiences should build upon one another. What is also

important to keep in mind is that although there are specific favorable time periods (birth through age 5) for learning and growth, it is never too late to nurture and support any kind of growth.

Fancy Equipment Not Needed

Try not to “overdo” it or to “over-worry” about your child not developing or achieving his best. For example, the recent fad of “baby flash cards” and various programs to enhance your child’s “intelligence” early in life has not been found scientifically sound or proven that it works. Human beings are naturally “wired” to learn at a specific time and speed and there is no magical formula or way to speed up the process. Having realistic expectations of your child can take the concern out of trying to make your child “smart.”



You already have natural instincts on what is best for your child. Odds are, you are already doing many things that are supporting your child’s brain development and preparing them for a successful future. Providing a variety of experiences is the best way to make the most of when your child’s brain (and body) are growing at their fastest.

For More Information

There is a lot of good information on brain development available. There are more scientific explanations, as well as in-depth information for the lay-person. Here are some resources, including some that were used for the basic references for this newsletter.

- **Your local library and CCR&R Resource Lending Library.** Community libraries offer a wealth of material on brain development and other child development issues. Your local CCR&R also has access to resources for both parents and providers on child care and children’s development. Find out from your local CCR&R (call 1-800-424-2246 to find a CCR&R nearest you).

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- **Better Brains for Babies (BBB) Initiative**, www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/bbb/index.php. BBB shares research on brain development through their Web site (the "What You Need To Know" link).

- **Parents' Action for Children**, www.parentsaction.org, 310-285-2385. Parents' Action develops parent education materials, connects parents with one another, and fights for issues such as early childhood education, health care, and high quality and affordable child care. Available resources include videos, booklets, bookmarks, and CD-ROMs, that include such titles as "Ready to Learn," "Why Early Childhood Matters," and "The First Years."

- **ZERO TO THREE/Brain Wonders**, www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders/index.html. Brain Wonders offers information to parents, child care providers, and pediatric and family clinicians about how the brain develops through age 3.



- **National Scientific Council on the Developing Child**, www.developingchild.net/index.shtml, 919-929-8285. Many publications on brain development.

- **Talaris Research Institute**, www.talaris.org. Talaris provides research summaries on a variety of topics, including language acquisition, emotions, infant sleep patterns, the effects of stress on babies, imitative behavior and memory, stranger anxiety, and baby hypothesis testing.

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