

Building Baby's Brain: What Parents Can Do

The University of Georgia/College of Family and Consumer Sciences

Every parent wants a smart child. But until recently we believed that there wasn't much we could do to help the brain develop. Most people believed that a child's genes determined a basic level of intelligence, and little could be done to change it after birth.

Now we know that the brain does a lot of developing after birth. The basic brain cells are present at birth, but most of the connections between cells develop during the first 10 years or so of life.

As we learn more about how young brains develop, parents wonder what they can do to enhance their child's brain development.

The Two Basic "Rules"

The developing brain needs two basics: safety and positive experiences. Parents who want to build their babies' brain power should remember these two rules of thumb:

1. Create a safe environment. When a baby feels stress, the brain responds by producing a chemical called cortisol. High levels of cortisol can slow brain development.

You can reduce your baby's stress by making his world safe, responsive, and predictable. Remove any physical threats. Respond when he cries. And create predictable daily routines so that he learns what to expect from his world.

2. Provide enriching experiences. The brain learns best when it is challenged with new information and then compares the new with existing information. Exposing your baby to new things helps the brain strengthen old connections and make new ones. Even simple activities like a trip to the library or grocery store can help build your baby's brain.

But don't overstimulate the baby. Too many new things, or experiences that are too challenging, will only frustrate your child and may create stress.

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Everyday Activities Are Important

The good news is that building brain power isn't difficult. Many of the things you already do as a parent contribute to your child's brain development. Even simple activities like cuddling or reading are important. When you rock your baby, his brain builds the emotional connections that lead to healthier relationships. When you read aloud, the brain pathways for language and

reading become stronger. These little things make a world of difference in brain development. Here are some more ideas to build your baby's brain power:

- **Get good prenatal care.** Even before birth, the baby's brain is developing. Pregnant women should eat a

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nutritious diet, avoid alcohol and other drugs, and have regular prenatal checkups.

- **Pay attention to nutrition.** A growing brain needs good nutrition to thrive. Breast milk provides the ideal nutritional balance for a baby. If you don't breast-feed, feed your baby an iron-fortified infant formula. And always hold your baby when you feed her!

- **Create a safe environment.** Look at your baby's world from his perspective. Are his surroundings clean? Are there dangers such as sharp objects or choking hazards? Does he always ride in a car safety seat?

- **Talk to your baby.** Make eye contact. Smile at her. Play rhyming games. Read aloud. Sing songs. As she gets older, ask questions and explain things to her. All of this helps build language skills.

- **Find high-quality child care.** Look for caregivers who provide a safe environment and enriching new experiences for your child.

- **Expose your child to music.** Play rich, complex music. Sing songs. Give your child chances to experiment with a wide variety of musical instruments.

- **Limit television, and don't use it as a babysitter.** Children need interaction with real, live people to enhance their brain development.

- **Help your child live a balanced life.** Pay attention to the "whole child," not just intellectual skills like talking and reading. Allow plenty of time for running, climbing and other physical play. Encourage creativity. Give your child chances to play with other children. Expose your child to enriching new experiences in all areas of life.

- **Take care of yourself.** Parents who are stressed tend to pass some of that stress on to their babies. And stress can slow brain development. So take some time for yourself. Find people who can support you as a parent. Talk to

other parents about their experiences. The better you take care of yourself, the better equipped you will be to care for your baby.

- **Get the information you need.** Many resources are available to answer your questions about child development. Your pediatrician can answer many questions. Your child-care provider or local librarian may be able to suggest good books on child development. And the Family and Consumer Sciences agent in your county Extension Service office can give you more information on parenting. Don't hesitate to ask questions!

- **Remember, it's never too late!** The brain never stops developing. Children and adults of all ages can learn from new experiences.

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