

WHAT CAN YOU DO? (CONTINUED)

Ask questions. Many people can help you learn how to be a good parent. Your baby's doctor can answer questions about how she is growing and changing. Your librarian can help you find good books on parenting. Your county Extension Service office can help you learn more about being a good parent. Don't be afraid to ask questions. You don't have to know everything!

Remember, it's never too late! The brain never stops growing. Children and adults of all ages can learn from new things.



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"BETTER BRAINS FOR BABIES" COLLABORATION

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Building Baby's Brain

The University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Sciences

What Parents Can Do

Every parent wants a smart child. But we used to think a baby's brain was completely formed when she was born. We didn't think we could do much to help the brain grow.

Now we know the brain does a lot of growing after birth. Billions of brain cells are already formed at birth. These cells connect with each other during the first years of life. And what happens to a baby affects the kinds of connections her brain makes.

THE TWO BASIC "RULES"

The growing brain needs two things: Safety and good experiences. Parents who want to build their babies' brain power should follow these rules:

1. Make your baby's world safe.

When a baby feels upset, the brain makes a chemical called cortisol. Too much of this chemical can slow down your baby's brain growth.

You can keep your baby from feeling stress by making her feel safe. Take away things that could hurt her. Take care of her every time she cries. And do things at the same time every day so she learns what to expect.



THE TWO BASIC “RULES” (CONTINUED)

2. Do things with your baby.

The brain learns best when it is challenged with new things. Showing your baby new things helps the brain make new connections. Even simple things like a trip to the library or grocery store can help build your baby's brain.



Don't overdo it. Too many new things, or things that push too hard, will frustrate your baby. A frustrated baby feels stress, and stress can slow down brain growth.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The good news is that building brain power is easy. Lots of things you already do can help your baby's brain grow. Even simple things like cuddling or reading are important. When you rock your baby, her brain makes emotional connections that help her get along with other people. When you read out loud, the brain pathways for language and reading get stronger. These little things make a lot of difference for brains.

Here are some ways you can build your baby's brain power:

Get good prenatal care. The baby's brain is growing even before birth. Pregnant women should eat healthy food. Don't drink or use drugs when you're pregnant, and have regular doctor's check-ups.

Pay attention to what your baby eats. A growing brain needs good food. Breast milk has the right nutrition for a growing brain. If you don't breast-feed, feed your baby a formula with iron. Always hold your baby when you feed her! Feeding time is also a good time to talk to your baby.

Make sure your home and car are safe. Look at your baby's world from her point of view. Are her surroundings clean? Are there dangers like sharp objects or things she could choke on? Does she always ride in a car seat?

Talk to your baby. Look in her eyes. Smile at her. Repeat sounds that she makes. Play rhyming games. Read out loud. Sing songs. As she gets older, ask her things and explain things to her. All of this helps the brain build its language connections.

Find good child care. Make sure the environment is clean and safe. There should be lots of toys for your baby's age. Look for people who will play with your baby one-on-one.

Expose your baby to music. Play many different kinds of music. Sing songs. As your baby gets older, let her play with lots of musical instruments.

Don't use TV as a baby-sitter. Children need to talk to real, live people to help their brains grow.

Help your child live a balanced life. Pay attention to the “whole child,” not just things that will make her smart like talking and reading. Let her run, climb, and play. Help her be creative. Give her chances to play with other children.

Take good care of yourself. Babies sometimes feel stress if their parents are stressed. And stress can slow down a baby's brain development. So take some time just for yourself. Find people who can help you take care of the baby. Talk to other parents about things they have done. The better you take care of yourself, the better you can care for your baby.

