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# BUILDING A BRIGHT FUTURE: **Nurturing Your Baby's Brain**

**T**he early years are critical for your child's brain development. What happens or doesn't happen during your baby's first few years makes a big difference in your child's life. Thanks to new technologies, we now know that the brain is far from fully developed at birth. A baby's brain goes through some dramatic changes in the early years of life. And everything that happens in the brain depends on a baby's experiences. What your baby sees, hears, touches, smells, and tastes can actually influence the wiring in your baby's brain and can have dramatic effects on your child's later development.

**Wiring the Brain** Your baby is born with more than 100 billion brain cells, or neurons. The neurons that control basic processes such as breathing and digestion are connected at birth. But much of the brain's wiring does not develop until after birth. In the first months and years of life, brain cells form complex connections in many parts of the brain that shape our thinking, feelings, and behaviors.

During these early years, the brain makes many more connections than the baby will ever need. But the brain is also efficient at weeding out connections that are not used regularly, so that the most-used ones have more room to grow.

**The Importance of Experience** From the moment a baby is born, everything she sees, hears, touches, and feels helps build the connections that guide development. No two brains are alike. Each child's brain develops individual pathways to deal with his or her experiences. Parents who talk and read to their babies are helping them develop important language connections. And parents who respond sensitively to their baby's cries are building the emotional connections that lead to healthier relationships.



**What Can You Do?** Parents and other caregivers can help babies gain the experiences they need for healthy brain development. Here are some ways you can help your baby's brain develop:

- **Keep your baby's world safe and secure.** Remove any safety hazards from the environment. Respond lovingly and consistently every time your baby cries. Give her attention. A baby feels stress when the environment is dangerous or when caregivers do not respond to her. Stress can slow brain development.
- **Talk to your baby.** When she makes a sound, repeat it. Smile at her. Talk about the things you're doing together. Interacting face-to-face builds the brain connections needed for both language skills and a healthy emotional bond.
- **Start reading aloud right away.** Hearing adults read helps the brain develop language connections. It also gives parents and babies a chance to spend time together. And reading aloud helps your baby build a lifelong love of books.
- **Choose high-quality child care.** Babies need sensitive, loving care, and stimulating experiences, both in and out of the home. Choose a child care provider who interacts warmly with your baby and spends time with him one-on-one. Look for a safe and clean environment, a low baby-to-adult ratio, a caregiver who understands how children grow and develop, and a rich variety of age-appropriate toys.
- **Get the information you need.** If you have questions about your baby's development, there are many places you can go for answers. Ask your doctor questions during check-ups. Have your librarian recommend good books on child development. Contact the Family and Consumer Sciences Agent in your county Extension office for more information on parenting.

**The Bottom Line** Building your baby's brain doesn't require expensive materials or complicated activities. What's most important is the time and energy you spend nurturing your baby. By reading to her, singing songs, holding her securely, smiling and laughing with her, and responding every time she cries, you are helping her brain form the networks of connections needed to become a healthy, happy child.

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## HELPFUL RESOURCE

Interested in learning more about early brain development? Check out the Better Brains for Babies website to learn more about how the brain develops, to find out how adults can contribute to healthy brain development, and to find resources that will help you support your baby's growing brain. For more information, visit [www.bbbgeorgia.org](http://www.bbbgeorgia.org).



*For more information, contact your FACS Cooperative Extension Agent at 1-800-ASK-UGA1 (275-8421) or visit: [www.gafamilies.org](http://www.gafamilies.org)*

Contact your local Family and Consumer Sciences County Extension Agent for more information on parenting and to receive the *Building Baby's Brain* publication series (also available in Spanish).

*From the*  
**Guide for New Parents**

*Produced by*



THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA  
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL &  
ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

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CHFD-E-86 (2/12) JUNE 2011  
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