

Early education every day - for the baby in your life

When researchers released their findings about early brain development in the early 1990's, the general conclusion was that the brain of an infant is more remarkable than most people had previously realized. The introduction of proper stimulation, or the lack of, has a huge impact on the growth and development of a young child's brain; an impact that will affect a person for the rest of his or her life. When a baby is born, it can see, here, smell and respond to touch, but only slightly. What wires a brain, or rewires it after physical trauma, is repeated experience. Each time a baby tries to touch an object, gazes intently at a face or listens to a song, their brain starts remembering. Around two months the motor-control center of the brain develops to the point that infants can reach out and grab a near-by object. Around the age of four months depth perception develops and around 12 months the speech centers of the brain are ready for language development.

The next time you talk to a baby, think about what is happening from the point of view of the baby. He is hearing a sound and will eventually learn to distinguish whose voice he is hearing, even before he knows what the sounds mean. His brain will then help him figure out if the voice represents someone he knows or does not know. What happens when a baby realizes it his mother's voice? He will turn his head to find the voice. What happens when dad stops what he's doing, looks at the baby and starts talking to him? The baby's whole body will start wiggling; arms and legs kick with excitement. Try talking to a baby and stop, allowing him or her to "talk" back, either by making noises or using body language. Throughout this whole interaction, the baby is recognizing sounds, voices, faces; he is learning about the give and take of communication. He is learning that if he does one thing; the adult will do something else. Babies learn how to get attention when they want or need it. They start learning about positive (and negative) feedback.

Besides talking, there are lots of things to do with a

baby. At three months they follow objects with their eyes. Offer visual stimulation by showing her brightly colored objects and then move them slowly to help the eyes learn to track objects. Play music, sing songs, repeat rhymes and dance with the baby.

A few months later, reaching, touching and grasping will become important. Offer toys so that she can learn to reach, grasp, hold and drop. When the baby is on her tummy and able to hold her head up start putting toys within her reach but far enough away to allow her to stretch and practice reaching and grasping. This is a great age to play peek-a-boo. Put a childproof mirror at her level so that she can visually examine and touch her image.

Around six months some babies will start rolling from stomach to back and be able to sit unaided. Their ability to hold toys with both hands and pass them back and forth is getting better. This is a good time for toys that make noise, have moving parts inside and have different textures. Remember that anything that can fit in a small film can is a choking hazard. Toys need to be well made with no small parts that can come off as everything goes into the mouth. Talk to your child and smile as this actually has a positive effect on brain development. Sing songs and read simple books. Repeat the names of things, name objects when you give them to the baby and tell them what you are doing. It is also important to allow them time to entertain themselves for short periods. Let them explore their toys and other child safe objects while you're doing something in the same room. This is how they learn about their world and start to learn that they are individuals. Talk to them, give them safe objects to touch and explore, sing with them and most of all - laugh with them!

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensure that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. www.earlylearningnh.org