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Research and Extension

Building Baby's Brain

What Parents Can Do

All parents want their children to be smart and successful. Parents play an important role in helping ensure healthy brain development. Researchers have found that a child's brain continues to develop long after birth. The pathways of connections between the brain's cells, or neurons, develop and change until a person is about 25 to 30 years old. Experience also makes a difference in brain development. Parents can do many things to support their child's healthy brain development, beginning before birth and continuing until their child is an adult.

➤ The Two Basic "Rules"

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

1. Create a safe environment

When a baby feels stress, the brain responds by releasing the hormone cortisol, which activates the body's stress response. This stress response is healthy, but only in small doses. If the body remains under constant stress, brain development and physical growth may slow down. Prolonged exposure to the cortisol released during the stress response can cause permanent damage to a developing brain.

You can reduce your baby's stress by making his world safe, responsive, and predictable. Remove any physical dangers, respond every time he cries, and follow 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 relates the new information to what the child already knows. 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 expose your baby to new things that help strengthen connections in her brain.

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

➤ Everyday Activities Are Important

The good news is that supporting healthy brain development isn't difficult or expensive. The things you already do as a parent contribute to your child's brain development.

Simple activities like cuddling, reading, and singing are important for your baby's growing brain. When you rock your baby, her brain strengthens the emotional connections that lead to secure relationships. When you read aloud or sing to her, the brain pathways for language become stronger. These little things make a world of difference in brain development. Here are some more simple but important ways to build your baby's brain:

- ***Take care of yourself during pregnancy.*** The baby's brain starts developing very early in pregnancy. Pregnant women should eat a healthy diet, avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and have regular prenatal checkups.

- ***Breastfeed if possible.*** The growing brain needs good nutrition to thrive. Breast milk provides the ideal nutritional balance for a baby. If you don't breastfeed, feed your baby an iron-fortified infant formula. And always hold your baby when you feed him.
- ***Make baby's world safe.*** Look at your baby's world from her perspective. Are her surroundings clean? Are there dangers such as sharp objects or choking hazards? Does she always ride in the appropriate car safety seat for her size and age?
- ***Talk to your child.*** Make eye contact, smile at him, play rhyming games, read aloud, and sing songs. As he gets older, ask questions and explain things to him. All of this helps strengthen brain connections for language skills and teaches him to be curious about his world.
- ***Find high-quality child care.*** Look for sensitive caregivers who provide a safe, secure environment and enriching new experiences for your child.
- ***Limit television, and don't use it as a babysitter.*** Children need interaction with real, live people to enhance their brain development.
- ***Don't overprotect your child.*** Parents sometimes protect their child from every disappointment in life. But learning to handle little stresses, like not getting a cookie you want, actually helps the brain be ready to deal with bigger stresses. When little challenges happen, treat them as learning experiences. Talk with your child about how to cope with them.
- ***Take care of yourself.*** Parents who are stressed can pass some of that stress on to their children, 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. Ask your pediatrician on your next well-child visit, or talk to your child care provider. Your local librarian may be able to suggest good books on child development. The Better Brains for Babies website (*www.bbbgeorgia.org*) has more information on brain development. And the Family and Consumer Sciences agent in your county Extension office can give you more information on parenting. Don't hesitate to ask questions as you learn how to parent your child.
- ***Remember that it's never too late.*** The brain never stops growing and changing. Whether your child is 9 months, 9 years, 19 years, or 29 years old, he can continue to learn from new experiences.

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For more information about brain development, visit **www.bbbgeorgia.org**

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