

## A Child's Developing Brain

People talk a lot these days about infant brain development. There are good reasons to know about it. A child's experiences in the first three years of life are very important in the development of the brain. In fact, a baby grows and learns more rapidly in the first three years of life than any other time in life. This makes some parents worry whether they are doing the right things. The good news is that you can provide just what your child needs.

**Every child needs to be loved.** It is important that a baby feels safe and cared for. Of course there are times when every child will feel unhappy, but when caregivers are doing their best to care for a child, the message of love gets through. When a child is sad or lonely or afraid, we can comfort her or him.

There will be times when a child does not calm down. A parent may become very frustrated with the child. Even when a parent cannot soothe a child, that parent can choose to never hurt the child. The parent may have to let the child cry for a few minutes while relaxing and preparing to try again to calm the child. Or the parent may need to get a neighbor to watch the baby while she or he takes a walk.

Every child needs to know that there is someone who cares about him or her. The child needs to know that the caregiver will always try to love and help. Touching, holding, and stroking your baby are important parts of showing your love. Making time to be with and play with your child is also very important in helping the child's brain develop.

**Every child needs interaction with an adult.** When we talk, sing, and play with a child, it stimulates her brain. Even when she is very young this interaction prepares the child to learn language and to feel connected to you and others. That is why it is a good idea to read to children and tell him stories even before he understands the words.

**Every child needs to explore.** Children learn through exploration and play. A baby learns through playing with a rattle. Within a few months the baby is ready to crawl, touch, and taste things. Sometime around the child's first birthday he will start to walk. As he touches, shakes, examines, and tastes his world, his brain will develop.

For that reason it is better to childproof our homes than to punish children for touching everything within their reach. Children need to explore as part of their development. We should be sure that their world is a safe place for that exploration.

It is popular to say that children do not come with instructions, but if we pay careful attention to our children, they provide most of the instructions we need. They let us know when they are bored; we can provide them something to do. They let us know when they are upset; we can soothe them. They let us know when they are uncomfortable; we can feed or change or comfort

them. We can learn the most important things we need to know about what our children need if we pay attention to their signals.

Sometimes adults try to rush a child's development. They may try to get a child to do something before he or she is ready. While it is good to provide children many opportunities to learn and explore, it is not helpful to try to get them to do things before they are ready.

A child requires a lot of time and energy. Yet there is nothing as enjoyable as watching a child grow, learn, and love. You can give to your child exactly what he or she needs in order to grow and be happy by providing a loving and interesting environment

### **Applications:**

Do your children feel safe? Do they know and feel that you love them? Is there anything you should do to help them to feel more safe and loved?

Is a caring adult involved with your infant most of his or her waking hours? An adult does not have to be playing with and talking to the child every minute but should be available during the baby's waking hours.

Have you child proofed your house? Child proofing includes changing the environment so that your child is free from any unnecessary risks. For example, it is a good idea to put medicines, soaps, cleaners, and chemicals out of reach of the children. Poisons should be put in locked cabinets. It may be necessary to provide gates by stairways so that your child does not fall down the stairs. Store knives and matches out of children's reach. Cover electrical outlets. Each home has its own hazards. Look around your home for anything that may be dangerous for your children.

Do your children have toys to play with? The toys do not need to be expensive; they can be as simple as homemade blocks or boxes.

Do you have regular outings with your children where they get an opportunity to go outdoors to play and explore?

Do you call on other caring adults to help you with your children when you need a break?