

five to thrive

The things you do every day that help your child's growing brain



a guide for parents and carers

notes / useful information

about this guide

We already know that parents are the most important things in children's lives, but recently we have discovered something even more amazing... we have discovered that how a parent behaves around their baby in the first three years of the baby's life has a significant impact on how their baby's brain develops. This is the foundation of how the brain will work as the child grows up and becomes an adult, so if a baby's brain develops healthily they are more likely to be happy and successful as older children and adults.

We know that every parent wants the very best future for their child, so we believe that all parents should know about this amazing research. We have produced this guide to help parents understand how the things they do every day can help build their baby's brain.

If you have any questions about the information in this guide, please contact your local children's centre or your health visitor.



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The brain is amazing...

In the first year of life the brain doubles in size. By the first birthday the brain is two thirds the size of an adult brain. If babies grew in height like this, they could be four feet tall when they were one year old!

The brain is not like any other part of the body. Nearly all the cells of the brain are in place when we are born – about a hundred billion of them. But they are not yet working. The brain grows when connections are made between the cells in response to what is happening to us. These connections are forming all the time all through our lives. What happens to us shapes our brains.

In the first three years of life the brain is growing and changing faster than it ever will again. At times during the first year of life a million connections are forming every single second in your baby's brain.

So what happens to your baby shapes their brain. And the most important thing that happens to your baby is you! Everything you do when you are with your baby sparks connections in their brain, turning connections into pathways that the child can use again.

five to thrive

Your child's body grows better when you give the child good food. Your child's brain grows better when you do five simple things that feed the growing brain:

Respond • **Cuddle** • **Relax** • **Play** • **Talk**

These are your child's daily 'five to thrive' – the building blocks for a healthy brain. A healthy brain will help your child be happy in themselves, make friends and enjoy their family life, as well as being the best start for learning once they go to school. And every day will bring many opportunities to give your baby's brain what it needs to grow well.



My brain grows better when you respond to me...

“ From the moment I was born I needed you. If you hadn't made sure I was looked after I would not have survived. I couldn't do much, but everything I did, the sounds and the movements I made, were for you. I was asking you to respond to me so that I could live.

I feel very scared if I get no response from you. When you look at me with love in your eyes I feel safe. Your voice helps me to feel safe. Being close to you helps me to feel safe.

When you look at me I am interested in your face, and I look at you. This helps my eyes to work together. My brain builds connections for looking at other people and understanding them.

When you copy the expression on my face, this helps me to understand what I am feeling. Then I copy you, and this builds connections in my brain for understanding and managing my feelings.

When you move I copy your movements. This helps my brain to grow connections that make it possible for me to manage my own body, and to use my body to communicate with other people.

My brain works very slowly at first. But when you respond to me in the same way over and over again the connections you are helping to build grow strong. Then they can carry messages between the different parts of my brain much more quickly.”





some suggestions

- Try to guess what your baby's crying means and meet their basic needs – warmth and comfort, food, a clean nappy, sleep.
- Copy the sounds or facial expressions your baby makes and see how they react.
- Help your baby to see something if they show you they want to look at it.
- Pass your baby objects they are interested in (if they are safe), especially if they are brightly coloured or have interesting shapes, textures or sounds.

remember

- Everyone takes time to learn how their baby communicates.
- Crying doesn't always mean your baby is 'upset'. It's the only noise they know how to make to get your attention. Sometimes they may just be singing or talking to you!
- When your baby has your full attention, their whole brain is working. When you are watching TV, texting or talking on the phone, they don't get this benefit.
- As children get older they begin to sort out their own problems as well as asking you for help. So sometimes 'wait and see' is a good response for older children.



respond

My brain grows better when you cuddle me...

“ Before I was born I was more aware of touch than of any other sense, and I was safely held in a small space. Now I can move freely, but I still feel most safe when I am in contact with a grown up who loves me.

Feeling safe with you fills my body with special chemicals that help my brain to grow. The patterns that grow in my brain when you cuddle me will mean that all my life I will be able to feel safe with safe people.

When I am close to you my body begins to work in tune with yours. When you feel excited or stressed your heart beats faster and so does mine. When you feel calm or happy your heart beats slower, and so does mine. Connections are building in my brain that will make it possible for me to control my body one day.

Remember that my brain works more slowly than yours, so I need time to notice what is happening and respond to it.”

some suggestions

- Cuddle your baby as often as you like – babies can't have too much contact.
- Respect the space of infants as they grow older. There may be times when they don't want a cuddle but you should try to find other ways to provide reassuring contact.
- Use different kinds of touching. Massage and stroking, tickling, hair-brushing and finger games (like 'Round and round the garden') are all good for your baby's brain.
- Use gentle circular rubbing of the stomach to help a baby with wind or constipation.

remember

- Babies need touch that soothes (cuddles) and touch that stimulates (tickles).
- Some very young babies (especially if they are small at birth) may sleep too much – gentle stroking or finger-play can encourage them to wake and feed.
- As well as cuddling, it is good to put your baby down to experience some quiet time – this is the start of learning how to be independent.





cuddle

My brain grows better when you relax with me...

“ When I was born I had no way to calm myself down or to manage my own reactions. When we are stressed our bodies are full of chemicals that make us active so that we can deal with whatever is upsetting us. These chemicals can be bad for the brain if we can't get the stress under control.

So when I feel stressed I need you to help me. My body works in tune with yours. When I am stressed I need you to calm down!

I know that having a baby is stressful. But if you can find ways to relax when you are with me, you can make a big difference to the way my brain works.

When you relax your heartbeat slows down – and so does mine. Your breathing slows down – and so does mine. Your blood pressure drops – and so does mine. Your muscles relax – and so do mine. Then you feel calm and comfortable, and so do I. That calm relaxed feeling fills my body with chemicals that help my brain to grow.

Just remember that my brain works more slowly than yours, so it may take some time for me to respond.”





some suggestions

- Try to end exciting play or activity sessions with a wind-down time in which you and your baby can enjoy a few moments of calm.
- Think about what makes a relaxing space for your baby to be in – soft lighting, warmth and gentle sounds all help.
- Sing or hum if you or your baby are getting stressed – this will help you relax and is very soothing for your baby. Singing is better than shouting!
- Try to have some time when you are just focused on the warmth, sounds, sights and smells of your baby, not on things you need to get done, or on people or events that have made you upset or angry.
- Find some of your own time to do the special things that help you relax – you have to look after yourself if you want to look after your baby.
- Relax into being a parent – the experience can be unfamiliar, scary or leave you feeling guilty or stressed, but all parents have had to learn the hard way.

remember

- A baby that has become over-tired and over-stimulated may need particular help to wind down. A close cuddle, rhythmic rocking and persistent Ssh-ing in a dark environment will sometimes ‘reset’ an over-stimulated baby brain.



relax

My brain grows better when you play with me...

“ I need you to soothe me when I’m upset, but I also need you to make life interesting for me. Toys are great, but the best toy in the world for me is... you!

When you stick your tongue out at me I copy you, and connections build in my brain linking together controlling my tongue and communicating. That will help me learn to speak.

When you pull faces at me I copy you, and connections in my brain make links between the expression on my face and communicating. That will help me to understand feelings.

When you play counting games, or singing games, or action games, my brain builds connections that help me to make sense of the world around me and to have fun.

As I get older, playing with me and helping me to play on my own or with other children builds connections in my brain that make it possible for me to think and plan, to make sense of the world around me, and to develop social skills.

And whenever I smile and you smile back at me I feel happy. Happiness fills my body with chemicals that help my brain to grow.”





some suggestions

- Follow your child's lead – if you join in their game, you are telling them that their ideas and decisions are important.
- Try to ensure you spend some time outside every day. The outside world is full of interesting, exciting things for your baby, and being able to look across long distances is very important in helping their developing vision.
- Get down on the floor for creative play – with models, dolls, blocks or just pieces of paper.
- Explore shapes, colours and textures with your child. You could look at picture books together, or make simple toys and pictures with pens, paper, fabric, etc.
- Encourage your growing child to play pretending games. Who will they be? Where will they go? What will they do there?

remember

- Play works best when you are on the same level as your child – on the floor together, sitting together at a table, etc.
- As your child grows older they will need more time to play by themselves and invent their own games – but they will always love to have some special time with you.



play

My brain grows better when you talk to me...

“ I love the sound of your voice. I could hear well even before I was born, and when I was first born I already recognised the voices of the people I live with. I love it when you talk, when you make nonsense noises, and when you sing. I get frightened if there is too much shouting or arguing.

When you talk to me I copy you. At first I can only make a few sounds, but the more you talk to me the more I can make sounds into words. I need you to tell me everything right from the start. I know nothing, so everything I learn in my life will be built on what you are teaching me now. Involve me in life by telling me about it.

I need you to listen to me as well. Remember that my brain works more slowly than yours, so it will take me time to respond when you speak to me. When I make sounds to you, it really helps the connections in my brain if you look straight at me and copy the sounds back to me. Then I know you are listening to me, which makes me feel I matter.

As I get older, take notice of what I am trying to say to you. Help me to tell you how I feel, so that I learn to manage my feelings by talking about them.

Reading is a great way to talk to me. Looking at a book together helps me to focus my eyes, to concentrate, and to think in a logical way. I can enjoy looking at a book with you right from the start of my life. And helping me to be interested in books and reading gives me a good start for learning through all my life.”





some suggestions

- Start by copying your baby's sounds and generating new ones (from 'Ma ma ma' to 'Ga ga ga'). The first talking doesn't have any words.
- Use as many rhymes, poems or songs as you can – to your baby you are the world's greatest singer!
- Read to your baby regularly, even when they are very young. Simple rhymes and rhythms will hold their attention.
- Talk to your baby about what they are experiencing. "Can you feel the soft toy?" "Did you see the cat?" "You're enjoying your milk this morning."
- Provide a running commentary on your own life. Tell your baby about colours, count the steps you climb or the socks and towels as you do the washing.
- Keep your 'sharp' voice for when you are warning a baby about something dangerous.

remember

- Any words will help to build your baby's brain. Pop songs, a shopping list or the writing on the cereal packet are more meaningful than Shakespeare to young children.



talk

useful resources

Below is a selection of resources that may be helpful to you. Some of them you can access locally; others are available free online; books and DVDs may be available via the library service. Please note that the list is not exhaustive, but should provide a useful starting point.

If you want help to access these resources or to find anything else that would be useful as you look after your baby, please talk to your local children's centre or your health visitor.

Local resources

BookStart – Provide a Baby Pack, with two board books for you to share with your baby, or the BookStart Treasure Chest for older children (3–4 years)

Every Child A Talker – A national project to develop the language and communication of children from birth to five

Start for Life – Free information and support to help you provide the best nutrition and exercise for your child

Online resources

Families in the Foundation Years – National site with useful information, videos and links:
<http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/parents>

iCan – Charity that provides lots of resources on communicating with your baby:
www.ican.org.uk

Small Talk – A free book (available online) which can help you learn to talk to your baby:
www.hello.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-parents/smalltalk.aspx

Talk To Your Baby – Public website with free leaflets on communicating with young children:
www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby

Books and DVDs

The Wonder Year (DVD) – An enchanting film showing the first year of a baby’s life and how the brain develops (*Siren Films*)

What Every Parent Needs To Know – An accessible and comprehensive guide to child development and psychology (*Margot Sunderland, 2007*)

Your Baby and Child – Another great introduction to brain development for parents (*Penelope Leach, 2010*)

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