

Positive Parenting of Infants

Promoting Development in the First Year

Babies need a safe, interesting environment where they have opportunities for touching, tasting, smelling, listening and looking at things around them. Through contact with every day things, babies gather information about the world around them. Baby play is a learning experience. Each time you play a game with your baby, they learn something new. Some games may seem repetitive or even boring to parents, but while you play with them your child is learning from you. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you encourage your baby's development in the first year.

How To Promote Your Baby's Development

Getting Started

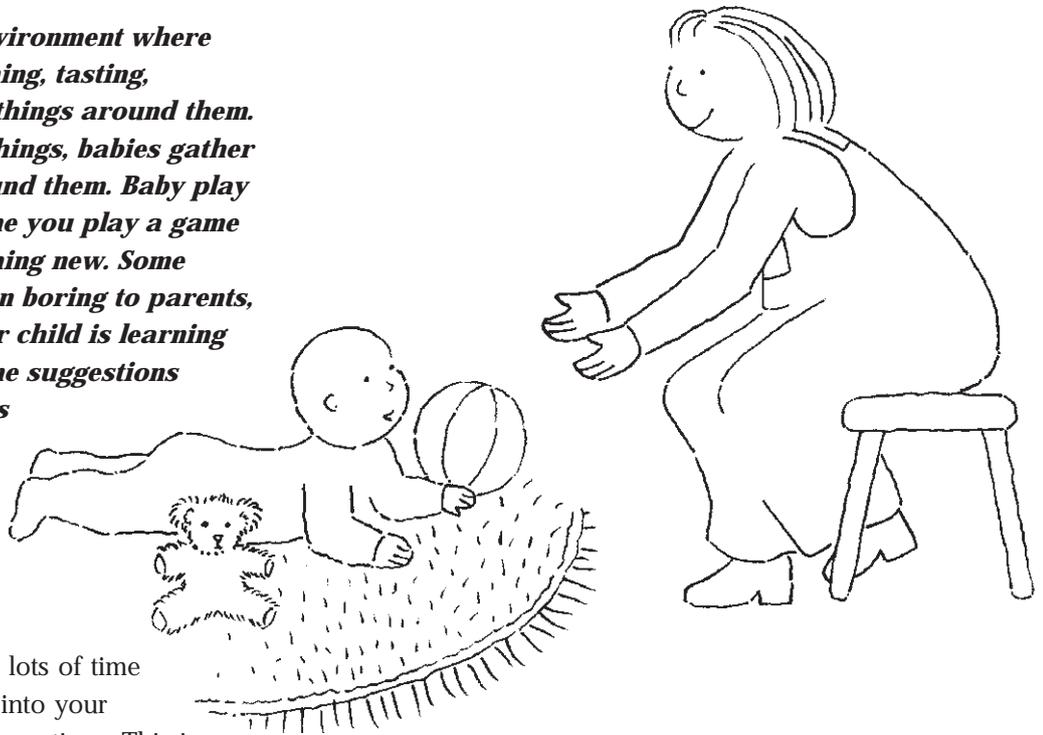
In the first few weeks you will spend lots of time looking after your baby as you settle into your new life together and start to develop routines. This is an important time to work on developing a positive relationship and bond with your child. To get to know your baby and start to develop a close relationship, take time just to look at, talk to, touch and hold your baby.

When your baby starts achieving a new skill such as smiling, cooing, grasping at things, pushing up onto their arms, or turning over, show your approval or excitement. Encourage your baby with hugs, praise, cheers and applause—whatever is comfortable for you and gets the message to your baby that you like what they are doing.

Talk To Your Baby

From a very early age babies can recognise and are comforted by their parents' voices. Talking with your baby helps to develop closeness and stimulates your baby's development. Talking promotes intellectual and language development, and children who hear a lot of talking and lots of different words as they grow up develop stronger vocabularies and do better at school.

Talk, make sounds, sing or coo to your baby as much as you can. Everyday activities like feeding, nappy changes, bath time, shopping, or driving in the car are good opportunities for talking.



There are many things you can do to help your baby's language development. Here are some suggestions:

- Speak to your baby slowly and clearly.
- Talk about what you are doing in the here and now.
- Name things your baby can see and touch.
- Repeat sounds your baby makes.
- Pause in your talking to allow your baby to 'reply' by making a noise or sound.
- Focus on single words—*Now it's time for a bath. This is your bath. See? Bath.*
- Sing and say nursery rhymes at every opportunity.
- Read picture books to your baby.
- Use instructions such as *Wave bye, bye* and *Kiss for Daddy*—your baby will not understand at first, but keep practising, they will soon learn what you mean.

See the parent tip sheet on *Language* for more information on promoting your child's language development from around 12 months.

Give Your Baby Things To Look At

In the first few months, things that interest babies most are shiny, bright and colourful such as coloured ribbons, plastic spoons, bright straws, a saucepan lid, or colourful

fabric cuttings. Make your baby's surroundings interesting to look at. In the first six weeks, babies like to see sharp contrasts around them such as black and white, then bright colours like red, yellow, green and blue. Babies enjoy looking at mirrors from a very young age. To be effective the mirror needs to be about 20 centimetres from your baby's face. By the time your baby is three to four months old, watch how delighted they are by what they see in the mirror.

You may like to put a mobile over your baby's cot or change table, or in front of them when they are on the floor or in a rocker. You can make a mobile by cutting out a number of brightly coloured balls from paper and hanging them at different heights from a coat hanger. To keep your baby interested, you can tie toys or other things from around the house to the frame of their cot. Objects you can hang up include pom poms, toys with bells, plastic keys, soft blocks or balls, plastic cooking implements and ribbons. Beware of smaller objects or detachable parts that could be swallowed. Keep anything that is not safe out of your baby's reach.

Help Your Baby Look Around

From about three months of age, when babies have more control of their necks, they enjoy being in a sitting position so they can see what is going on around them. A rocker or pram can be helpful or try propping them up with cushions on the floor or some other surface they cannot roll off. When your baby is tired of sitting they may cry or slump down. As neck muscles strengthen, your baby will be more stable and may be able to sit for longer. Usually by five to 10 months babies can sit unsupported, although they may need to rest on their arms to balance and may tip over if they try to reach for things. Between six to 11 months babies learn to push themselves up into a sitting position and are better able to look around.

Give Your Baby Things To Touch

In the first two months of life, babies develop the ability to focus on and look at objects. From one to three months babies will swipe at things hanging in front of them. By three months many babies can briefly hold something placed in their hand. This is a good time to try a soft rattle. The ability to grasp and hold objects with ease has developed by six to eight months. By nine to 12 months, babies are exploring and manipulating objects with intense interest.

Your three month old baby will become fascinated by their hands and fingers. Watch as your baby tries to make their hand go into their mouth. By about six months of age, your baby will have discovered their toes. They will grab them and play with them when they get the chance. Try to have your baby in bare feet sometimes when they are awake.

From around three months, provide your baby with lots of things to touch, hold and explore. Look for things that are small enough to be held by the baby but are safe to put in their mouth, because they will do this anyway. Make sure these objects are not sharp and are more than four centimetres wide so they cannot be swallowed. Many simple household items are fun to touch and explore. Household items, from kitchen utensils to books, can be as interesting to explore as bought toys.

Most babies become mobile between four to eight months, either by rolling, sliding or crawling. All babies of this age will be very curious and will want to explore. Allow your baby to have access to as much of your home as possible. Play pens are not recommended as they quickly cause boredom and may inhibit natural curiosity and learning. However, to be confident that your baby will be safe in their explorations you need to baby proof your home. Remove from reach any thing that may be unsafe or you do not want touched. You will need to do this again at around six to 12 months when your baby is able to pull themselves up to stand and will be able to reach higher. See the parent tip sheet on *Home Safety* for information on making your home safe for children.

Let Your Baby Hear Different Sounds

By listening to sounds, your baby will learn about language, rhythm, danger, emotions and feelings, and about other things going on around them. Stimulate your child by talking to them, and giving them rattles and other musical toys. Try playing some music or listening to the radio.

Let Your Baby Taste Things

Babies use their mouth to explore and recognise objects. From early on, your baby's taste buds will be stimulated by the milk they drink. As your baby gets older, tasting or mouthing becomes a way of exploring. Let your baby explore objects with their mouth. Make sure there is nothing your child can mouth that is poisonous, sharp, or small enough to swallow or choke on. Babies' mouths are very sensitive and this early exploration with their tongue is all part of understanding their world. Avoid putting a dummy in your child's mouth for long periods of time as your baby will miss out on some important learning experiences.

Put Your Baby On Their Stomach

In the first month, start providing opportunities for your baby to lay on their stomach to play. Begin with very short periods of one to five minutes, several times a day. Babies will be able to spend more time in this position as their head control increases. Stomach play helps baby develop control in their shoulders, neck and head. This also gives

babies a new view on their world. Provide interesting things to look at while your baby is in this position. From two to four months, when you place your baby on the floor, put a range of objects just outside of their reach. This will encourage your child to reach and swat at objects as well as practise pushing up on their arms. Eventually, this will lead to crawling.

Encourage Your Baby To Be Active

Have a safe space to crawl and walk in, both indoors and outside, as well as safe places for your baby to climb. Always ensure that your baby is supervised, especially when they become mobile and active. You may need to encourage your child to be active, by pretending to chase and catch them, or getting down near the floor and encouraging them to follow you.

Take Your Baby On Outings

Your child's world is full of interesting things to see. Take them out every day if you can, for walks in a garden or a park, and visits to shops and busy spaces such as your nearest town centre. Talk to your baby about what you can see (such as animals, cars, colours), hear (such as machinery, sirens), feel (such as wind, heat, cold), and smell (such as flowers, wood smoke). Point out things of interest along the way.

It is important to teach your baby about their world. Use incidental teaching (see the *Positive Parenting* booklet) to help your baby learn about their environment, such as how pressing a button makes the doorbell ring, and ideas such as hot and cold, up and down, in and out, stand and sit, and wet and dry.

Encourage Your Baby's Curiosity and Imagination

Encouraging children's curiosity and imagination is important for their educational development. Their later thinking ability is based on exploration of small objects in their environment. It is also important to encourage imaginative play, such as talking on a toy phone or pretending to drive—this will mostly start around your baby's first birthday.

Activities Babies Like

Babies enjoy activities that involve change. They also enjoy games that involve repetition. Your baby will enjoy and learn from toys that move or make a noise when they are touched, such as rattles and activity centres. What they learn is that what they do makes something else happen. This is called cause-and-effect and starts to develop around eight months of age.

From around eight months, children start to develop the foundations for later learning, thinking ability and academic achievement. Here are some suggested activities to keep your child stimulated and to promote their development. You may find your baby likes these activities even earlier.

- Safety proof your home and allow your baby to explore as much of it as possible.
- Games like 'Peek-a-boo' teach children that things still exist when you cannot see them. Hiding things and getting your baby to find them helps your baby to remember where things are, and that they still exist even though they cannot be seen.
- A plastic container, and lots of safe interesting objects to put in and take out, is lots of fun and helps develop motor skills.
- To teach children about size, things that fit inside one another are useful, such as different sized plastic tubs.
- Games that involve pouring, or emptying and filling, help children learn concepts such as empty and full. Try activities like tipping pegs out of a bucket and putting them back in, or pouring water from one container to another in the bath. This also helps develop coordination.
- Counting games or rhymes, such 'One-two-buckle my shoe', teach children about numbers. Others like 'This little piggy' are favourites as they combine attention and physical affection. Rhymes and folk songs can also teach children about rhythm, rhyming words and cultural heritage.
- Clapping games like 'Pat-a-cake' can help children learn about rhythm and improve their coordination.
- Language skills can be taught through games such as 'Where is your nose? Your mouth?'
- Shape sorters help children learn to recognise shapes and colours even if they cannot say them. They also help develop coordination.
- Push and pull toys help children practise walking or to walk with some support if they are unsteady.
- Building blocks are popular from about 10 to 11 months and help children learn stacking and eye-hand coordination. They also help babies learn concepts such as high and low, big and small, over and under, and tall and short.

- Any toys or activities that involve parts to be pressed, turned, flipped or twisted help your child's coordination and physical development. Songs and games can coordinate words and actions, such as 'Twinkle twinkle little star'.
- Children often enjoy games that involve copying or following the leader. This helps them develop their watching skills and coordination.
- Try introducing crayons from around 12 months onwards to help develop your child's creativity. It is best not to use pens or pencils with babies as they may hurt themselves with the sharp points.
- Musical toys help children learn about rhythm and melody. You can start with something like a wooden spoon on a box or plastic tub, or some rice or pasta in an empty plastic bottle.
- Encourage your child to take an interest in books or magazines with pictures. This will help their imagination, concentration and get them ready to learn to read.
- Activities involving pretend play also help develop children's learning and imagination. Start with simple pretend activities like toy telephones, tea sets, toy brooms, simple kitchen equipment and dress ups (from about 12 months onwards).

Points To Remember

All babies are different. Normal, healthy babies can vary greatly in when they acquire new skills and abilities. Use the ages given in this sheet as a general guide only. However, if you ever are concerned about your child's development do not hesitate to discuss your concerns with your Maternal and Child Health Nurse.

Remember, your child's attention span will be short. At 12 months of age, many children are not able to sit still for longer than five minutes. Do not be discouraged if your child seems to lose interest in an activity quickly, their attention span will increase as they get older.

Your baby will learn about their world by looking, listening, touching, tasting and smelling things around them. Give your baby lots of opportunities to explore their surroundings even if it means getting dirty or making a mess.

Being available to your baby and playing with them is essential for their development and well being. However, it is important that babies learn how to entertain themselves and play independently as well. Many of the activities described in this tip sheet are things that babies can do by themselves. Providing lots of interesting engaging activities can help to prevent babies developing the habit of being over demanding of your time and attention.

Key Steps

- Talk and read to your baby from the start.
- Give your baby things to look at—sit your baby up at times to help them look around.
- Give your baby safe things to touch.
- Let your baby listen to different sounds.
- Let your baby taste safe things and explore with their mouth.
- Put your baby on their tummy for short periods each day.
- Encourage your baby to be active.
- Baby proof your home and allow them to explore.
- Take your baby on outings to help them learn about their world.
- Encourage your baby's curiosity and imagination.
- Provide activities that will stimulate your baby and promote their development.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or are concerned about your child's progress or development, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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