

Right from the start

Recent research into how babies grow and develop shows that by caring for your baby and giving them positive experiences, you help build a strong foundation for their future.

When you have a baby you want to do everything you can to give your baby the best start in life. Learn how to make the most of your child's early years . . . right from the start.



Your baby's feelings and brain

Babies learn and respond right from the time they are born and a baby's brain grows more in the early months of life than at any other time. In fact,

unlike the rest of the body, the brain has done most of its growing by the time a child is five years old.

At birth a baby's brain has billions of brain cells and each expands and connects to thousands of others. These new connections and pathways are being laid down in the brain, so

that your baby's experiences in the weeks, months and early years are important to the development of the brain or the 'brain wiring'. Some connections may become strong, others may not be used and some are discarded as baby's brain develops.

Your baby will grow best if they feel close to you.

If you care and love your baby well from the very early months, your baby will learn to respond positively, trust and love other people.

The very first relationship that your baby has is with you – that's why these first relationships are so important.

Positive early relationships also teach your baby how to learn, to be curious about life and to be confident. This helps them learn better when they go to school.

Babies who have loving and caring early relationships are better able to cope with problems or difficulties and the stresses and changes that life brings.

When a baby has loving, caring experiences the connections in the brain for feeling good and learning are strengthened. The same happens with the connections for talking, learning, exploring, thinking and all the other things babies will need.

When a baby feels unhappy or stressed a lot of the time, or has little stimulation (like not being touched, noticed or talked to very much) the unpleasant connections are strengthened. If this happens, as babies grow they may be less able to learn and develop in the very best way.

What you can do

* Respond quickly to your baby's needs and signals – this will help them to trust you and know that the world is a safe place to be in. Knowing this will make it easier to learn all the other important things. (No one can learn new things easily when stressed, afraid or crying).



Crying is the only way that babies can tell you they need something.

* Try and make sure that most of the caring for your new baby comes from only a few people - babies get confused when they have too many people fussing over them.



* Spend gentle, loving time with your baby when he is awake.

* Talk softly and sing to him.

* Hold, cuddle and stroke him so he learns to feel safe and loved.

* Watch and listen so you learn his different cries and little signals and what they mean.

* Respond to his signals, when he looks as if he wants to talk to you, or smiles, or makes little noises, or cries.

* Copy some of your baby's little noises or gestures. This shows that you have heard his 'conversation' and you are replying. It is an important way to help him in the first steps of learning to talk and do things.

* Talk to your baby as you do things with him. Let him know what is going to happen next. Say the same words every time such as "I'm going to pick you up now" or "Here we go." Don't just pick him up without warning. Remember that new experiences (even things like a nappy change) can be stressful to a tiny baby.

* Take your baby for a walk so that he can look at new things.

* Give your baby a rattle to play with and soft things to look at and touch.

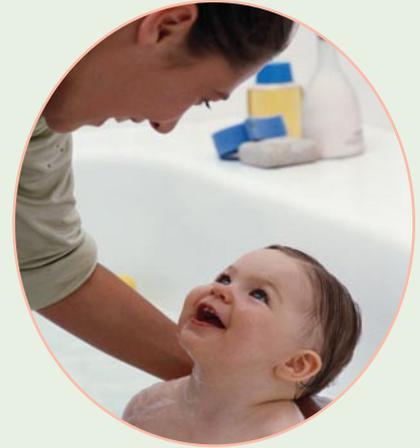
* Give him some play time on his tummy on the floor (but never leave a baby alone on his tummy).



* Your baby won't understand your words at first but will learn from the tone of your voice and will be learning sounds as well. Even tiny babies can tell different sounds and they soon get to know the special voices of the people who care for them.

* Be sensitive to your baby - don't overwhelm him. If he yawns or looks away he may be saying to you that he needs a rest. Too much activity when he doesn't want it can be unhelpful as can too little activity.

* If possible keep him with you when he is awake because this is the time when babies enjoy company. Babies don't like being bored any more than adults do!



* Doing things in special ways is important and comforting for babies and young children. The same special toy at bath time, the same dish to eat from, the same way of being put to bed or saying "goodbye" is reassuring and will come to have special meaning for your baby.

* When someone else cares for your baby, show them what your baby likes and dislikes. Spend some time with your baby and the other person so your baby is with you both at first. This will help them to feel safe.

* If you must leave your child, although it can be difficult for both you and your child, don't sneak away. Give a cuddle, say you're going and say that you'll be back. Some babies and young children may cry and protest. It takes time to get used to you not being there and to learn that you will return. Try not to look unsure, anxious or sad even when your child is upset. It becomes easier as he learns to trust that you will return.

