

Most parents know that the early years of a child's life are the building blocks for the future but why do the first few years matter so much? In recent years there has been new research into how babies grow and develop. We now know how important it is to care for babies and provide experiences that help to prepare a strong base 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. A baby's brain grows more in the early months of life than at any other time.

New research has been about how a baby's brain develops. 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 not be strong, others may not be used and some are discarded.

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.

Research has also shown that babies and children do best if they have someone that they are very close to in the first year of life. This is called attachment. It comes from having loving care by the same people in the same way over the early months. Babies learn a way to

respond in relationships that give them a basis for what to expect in all future relationships. This is why these first relationships are so important.

The important building blocks for learning also come from these early relationships. Positive early relationships and opportunities to be curious and explore lead to children developing confidence, emotional control, ability to get along with others and ability to cope with stress. They also prepare the way for making the most of learning during the school years.

- 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.
- If you respond quickly to your baby's needs and signals, your baby will learn to trust you and to know that the world is a safe place. This will make it easier to learn all the other important things. No one can learn new things easily when stressed, afraid or crying.
- If babies have too many people to respond to it can be confusing for them. This doesn't mean that your baby can't learn to know other people, but that most of the caring should come from a few people without too many changes.
- Stress can have a negative impact on how babies develop. New things can be stressful to all of us, but especially for babies, when everything, even nappy changes are new experiences.

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THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

Your baby's feelings and brain *continued*

What you can do

- 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.
- Look into your baby's eyes when you are feeding or holding him. Babies love to look at your face.
- Watch and listen so you learn to know 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. Crying is the only way that babies can tell you they need something.
- Copy some of your baby's little noises or gestures. This shows your baby that you have heard his 'conversation' and you are replying. It is an important way to help him in the first steps of learning that he can do things and in learning to talk.
- 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.
- Your baby won't understand your words at first but he will learn from the tone of your voice and he will be learning the 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.
- Read to your baby for a few minutes each day. This may feel strange at first, but it can have a big impact on your baby's development. Sharing a book brings together many of the things your baby needs to grow and develop. Looking at bright pictures and hearing your words can be a special time for closeness, safety, touching, seeing, hearing, and learning about sounds, as well as gradually learning what they mean.
- 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 is as unhelpful as too little activity.
- Give him some learning experiences:
 - take him for walks in the pram
 - give him some play time on his tummy on the floor (but never leave a baby alone on his tummy)
 - sing little songs to him
 - give different things to look at and touch
 - talk to him about what you are doing
 - give him a rattle to hit and make a noise with—this helps him learn that he can make things happen.

- 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 duck 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 the other person the things 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 him to feel safe.
- When you must leave your child, although it can be difficult for both you and your child, don't sneak away. Give a cuddle as you 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 she learns to trust that you will return.

All babies cry

- When your baby cries try to comfort him so he learns that someone is there caring for him. Sometimes it is hard to know what the crying is about when babies are very young.
- You may get it wrong at first, but don't be hard on yourself. It takes time to learn to know a new person.

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Your baby's safety

Babies are helpless and unable to protect themselves. They are totally dependent on their parents or carers to make sure they are safe. There are many things that can help keep babies safe.

What you can do

- **Always support your baby's head** with your arm or hand as you lift and hold her. A very young baby's neck muscles are not strong enough to hold up the head.
- **Always put your baby to sleep on her back**, with her feet to the end of the cot or bassinet so she can't wriggle down and get her head under the bedding.
- **Use a cot of safety approved cot.** New cots must have a safety standards label on them.
- **Play gently with your baby.** Rough games such as throwing up in the air are very dangerous for little babies and young children and can harm their developing brains.
- **Make sure your baby is protected from pets** (and pets are protected from the baby as she grows).
- **Protect your baby from being frightened.** Don't shout at your baby, play loud music near your baby or make sudden loud noises.
- **As your baby gets older and starts to crawl,** check your house for safety. Cupboards under the sink in the kitchen, bathroom or laundry that contain cleaning aids, detergents and medicines are especially dangerous.
- **Check all places where there is water**, for example, nappy bucket, ponds. Babies can drown in only a few centimetres of water.
- **Never shake a baby.** This can seriously damage babies' brains and bodies and can even cause death. If you find yourself wanting to shake a baby, think of some ways to calm yourself down while keeping baby safe.

Can I spoil my baby?

Many parents worry that they might be spoiling their child if they go to them when they are distressed or crying, but this is not really possible. **You can't spoil babies by responding to their needs.** You can harm them by not responding to their needs.

Babies who receive prompt, warm responses when they are distressed and are provided with what they need, tend to settle better and cry less in the long run. In soothing your baby when she's crying you can help your baby to become better at soothing herself.

Sometimes if parents are feeling very anxious, babies may also become more anxious. Other times parents can try too hard to stimulate a baby who doesn't really want it and really needs some quiet time or a gentle cuddle.

As you get to know your baby you will learn when she really needs you and what helps and what doesn't.

Caring for yourself

It is easy to find caring for a baby overwhelming, especially at first. It is easy to think no-one else can possibly be feeling like this. Many mothers say that they feel they are only 'just keeping my head above water' most of the time.

- To care for a baby well, you need to care for yourself
- Don't expect to do everything 'right'—it's not possible.
- Praise yourself for simple things.
- Don't dwell on mistakes—learn from them.
- Be proud of the efforts you put in through the day, no matter how small the tasks.
- Understand it's normal to feel swamped at times with a range of emotions.
- Reward yourself with one thing a day that makes you feel good.
- Make sure you have someone to talk to.
- Make time for special moments with your partner or close friend.
- Don't be afraid to ask for support and say 'Yes' to offers of help.

Remember that you are doing one of the most important things in life.

Contact a professional person, for example, doctor or health nurse if you feel that things are too overwhelming.

Trust and believe in yourself

- Many people give new parents advice and it's sensible to be open to ideas from others.
- Sometimes it can be difficult trying to work out what you think is best when family members have different ideas.
- There is so much information available and it can be often confusing with different points of view.
- It is important to look at all the information, listen to other ideas and choose to do what feels right for you and your baby.
- You know your baby best and you have the responsibility of making sure your baby has the best possible start.

Reminders

- Babies' brains develop best when babies are relaxed and enjoying what is happening in their lives. Feeling lonely, unhappy or stressed time is not good for brain development.
- Babies learn best if they feel safe and loved and have interesting things and places to explore and look at.
- Positive experiences are the building blocks for positive futures. Negative experiences can lead to negative connections for the future.
- Babies who have loving and caring early relationships are better able to cope with problems as they grow. This leads to coping better with the stresses and changes that we all have in our lives.
- You can't spoil babies by showing love or responding when they cry. This is what they need.
- Talking, cuddling and eye contact are good ways to show love to your baby.
- New experiences can be stressful and stress can have a negative impact on how a baby develops.
- Learn and respond to your baby's cries and signals. Over time, you will come to know what they mean.
- Look after your own needs. If you are getting stressed get support by contacting a friend, a neighbour, family or a parent helpline. Ask someone to care for your baby while you take a break.
- If you are worried about your baby's progress, talk to a health professional.
- There is no one right way to be a parent.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Maternal and Child Health	8am–5pm Monday–Friday	6207 9977
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including About babies, Being a dad, Being a mum, Being a parent, Milestones
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens
www.zerotothree.com	Information on healthy development of babies and young children

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