



Nurturing Skills™



for Families Prenatal - 19



Parent Handbook

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Children's Brain Development

Children's brains are a work in progress. How they develop is related to the experiences they have in their early years. How children's brains develop depends upon how the genes they're born with (nature) interplay with the experiences they have (nurture). There are prime times for acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills called *critical windows*. These critical windows are when certain parts of the brain can learn the best.



How Children's Brains Develop

Each child is born with about 100 billion brain cells, which is ten times the number of stars in the entire Milky Way. At birth, the connections between the cells are not very fast. But, the more the brain is stimulated, the faster and stronger these connections become. These connections then become a part of the permanent structure of the brain. But, if the brain is not stimulated, the connections between cells dry up. Simply, the more connections between the brain cells the better because these connections are forming the structures that will allow a child to learn.

Parts of the Brain

The brain is made up of five major parts:

The **Brainstem** is fully developed at birth. The brainstem is responsible for functions such as blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature. The brainstem must be fully functional at birth in order for an infant to survive.

The **Cerebellum** controls a person's automatic movements and balance. Dancing, kicking a football, or bringing a cup to the lips to drink are all coordinated by the cerebellum. If a child's cerebellum is damaged, the brain cannot coordinate movement.

The **Midbrain** controls sleep, arousal responses, appetite and motor movements (such as running and skipping). The midbrain is very important for moving.

The **Limbic System** controls emotions and long-term memories. The limbic system can override rational thoughts and parts of the brain controlled by the brainstem such as blood pressure. Stress will cause blood pressure to go up. A part of the limbic system is involved in attaching emotions to memory. So, every time we remember an event, the emotion comes along with it. Another part of the limbic system converts information from learning and working into long-term memory. It checks new information against stored experiences in order to establish meaning.

The **Cortex** is the "executive branch" of the brain. It regulates decision-making and makes judgments about incoming information. The different regions of the cortex are responsible for processing our vision, touch, hearing, speech, language development, and problem solving, and allows us to plan and rehearse our future actions.

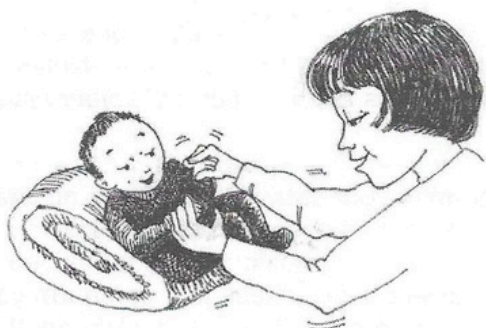
Critical Windows for Babies Brain Development

The term "critical windows" means that at certain times in the life of a child, parts of their brain that are responsible for important functions need to be stimulated so the connections between the brain cells can be made and become strong. The following critical windows for specific functions are presented along with what you can do to build strong brain cell connections.

Vision - Critical Window is Birth to 6 Months

It's important that your child have interesting things to look at. Here are some ideas:

- Hold your baby so she can look around and see all the wonderful things in her world.
- Decorate your baby's room with colorful objects. Put up big pictures of animals or other children's faces for her to look at. High contrast pictures stimulate the brain and strengthen the connections between cells. DO NOT put your baby in front of a television. The sights and sounds can be a sensory overload for the baby.



Vocabulary and Speech - Critical Window is Birth to 3 Years

Did you know that an adults' vocabulary is largely determined by the speech that is heard within the first three years? A baby's brain pays attention to the sounds, not the words, which are being said. To build strong neural connections in the brain, here are some suggestions:

- Talk to your child in full sentences. "Oh, I can see you are a very hungry little girl," is better than "Hungry?"
- Read to your children - fun, happy stories with a lot of stimulating pictures!
- Sing to your baby. She'll love the rhythm and melody of your voice.
- When you're with your baby, explain the things you are doing. General conversation is important for your baby even if he can't talk along with you.

Emotional Development - Critical Window is Birth to 18 Months

A child's home life plays an important role in how a child's personality will develop. A nurturing home will help children grow up emotionally healthy. A home with stress and violence can cause children to become fearful, anxious and hyperactive. Here are some things to do to help your baby develop emotional health:

- Pick up your baby when he cries. Talk to him. Comfort him. Find out why he's crying. Be nurturing. Your baby really needs to be reassured.
- Babies enjoy having the same people in their lives every day. Stick to the same childcare as much as possible.
- Establish warm, nurturing parenting routines around feeding; bath, dressing and bed times. Babies love the consistency that routines provide.



Logic and Math - Critical Window is Age 1 to 4 Years

Infants begin to become aware of cause and effect, the location of objects, and the function of objects very early in life. Here are some suggestions for helping children develop their reasoning abilities:

- Explain the purpose of household items. Turn on and off light switches; open and close plastic items; put small plastic bowls into larger ones.
- Give children things to play with; help them to explore their environment. Remember: Put safety latches on cabinet doors that contain items that can be harmful to baby. Review your safety checklists and remove dangerous items. Children need to explore in safety.



What Every Child Needs

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| Interaction | Consistent, long-term attention from caring adults actually increases your child's capacity to learn. |
| Gentle Touch | Holding and cuddling do more than just comfort your baby – touch helps his brain grow! |
| Stable Relationships | Relationships with parents and other caregivers buffer stress that can harm your child. |
| Safe, Healthy Environments | Environments should be free of unsafe materials (like lead paint, sharp objects and other hazards) and loud noises. |
| Self-Esteem | Self-esteem grows with respect, encouragement and positive role models from the beginning. |
| Quality Care | Quality care from trained professionals when you can't be with your child. |
| Play | Play helps your child explore her senses and discover how the world works. |
| Communication | Talking with your baby builds his verbal skills. |
| Music | Music expands your child's world, teaches new skills, and offers a fun way to interact with your child. |
| Reading | Reading to your child from the earliest days of her life shows its importance and creates a lifelong love of books, and helps grow a healthy brain! |

