

Understanding & Supporting Your Baby's Development



▲ Introduction

THE FIRST two years of a baby's life is a time of extraordinary growth and development. Your baby will change more during his first two years than at any other time. During this time, your child will grow and develop from a tiny newborn to an active, curious and vocal toddler with a remarkable sense of independence. While genetic factors will play an important role in your baby's development, recent brain research indicates that development is also highly dependent on early experiences. Researchers now confirm that the way we interact with children and the experiences we provide or encourage have a big impact on emotional development, learning abilities and the way children function in later life.

There are countless ways in which you can provide your baby with experiences that will support his development. These can be fun and positive experiences for both you and your baby. With an understanding of the developmental tasks that face your baby, and a little imagination, routine activities such as feeding and bathing can become rich opportunities for growing and learning.

It is the aim of this booklet to provide you with information that will help you to understand your baby's development. The material draws on research from the fields of developmental psychology and neuropsychology and covers infant development from birth to eighteen months.

IMPORTANT NOTE

It is important to remember that your child is an individual who will grow and develop at his own pace and with his own style. For example, not all babies sit, crawl or walk at exactly the same age. One child may begin walking at 9-10 months while another may do so at 12-13 months and still another at 17-18 months. While all babies follow the same progressive pattern in their growth and development, the pace at which they move through the developmental stages is entirely individual. If however, you have concerns about any aspect of your baby's development please consult your child and family health nurse or family doctor.



▲ Infant Brain Development

RECENT advances in brain imaging techniques have made it possible to study the brain's inner workings with amazing precision. These technologies have allowed new insights into early development. Most interesting is the finding that a newborn's brain is remarkably unfinished. In fact, a newborn's brain is only about 25% of its approximate adult weight. By age 2 however, it will have reached 75% of its adult weight.

With most brain development taking place within the few years of life, it is not surprising to learn that a child's earliest experiences are very important in shaping subsequent development. In order to develop, brain cells need to be activated and to connect with other cells. It is the formation of these connections that is critical to the healthy development and efficient functioning of the brain. The amount of stimulation your baby receives has a direct effect on how many connections are formed. Moreover, repetitive stimulation strengthens these connections and makes them permanent. By adulthood, the pathways in the brain will be well established, allowing information to be processed quickly and efficiently.



▲ 0-4 Months

THE FIRST four months of a baby's life is a time of rapid growth. Already you will have witnessed some amazing changes in many areas of your baby's development. As a newborn for example, many of his bodily movements were dominated by reflexes. You may have noticed how he turned his head in the direction of a touch on the cheek or how he tightly grasped your finger when you stroked the palm of his hand. These are both examples of reflexes. Reflexes are automatic responses that are present at birth.

In the months following birth, the strength of these early reflexes tends to weaken. With increased control over head and neck movements your baby will have enjoyed turning his head from left to right to follow a cot mobile or to follow your voice as you moved around the room. When placed on his tummy, he will have tried lifting his head and chest, using his forearms for support. He may have even attempted to grab at a favourite toy.

You may also have noticed some changes in your baby's communication. Newborns communicate primarily by crying. While they also use other non-verbal language such as facial expressions, it is not until about two months of age that they begin to make distinctive sounds. Most notable are the coos and babbles used to communicate pleasure and contentment.

Newborns are also remarkably responsive to the voices of others, and especially attuned to the voices of their parents.

Even during their first month, babies can distinguish fine differences in speech sounds showing preferences for the voices of familiar caregivers. In fact, research suggests that by the time babies are 3 months old they will be able to distinguish several hundred different spoken sounds!

The visual system of a newborn is also developing. You may have noticed that your baby was visually alert from very early on, particularly toward human faces. Research has shown that very young babies do indeed have visual preferences. They have been shown to prefer bold patterns, certain colours, and active, smiling, talking, blinking, or laughing faces. While vision improves rapidly over the first few months of life, it will be some time before mature 6/6 vision is achieved.

In addition to vision and hearing, the senses of smell, touch, and taste are all important in your baby's learning. With the senses well developed at birth, your baby has all the basic equipment for active learning. As he grows, he will with your help, want to explore his environment to satisfy his inbuilt curiosity and desire to learn.



▲ 4-6 Months

YOUR BABY is now around 4 months of age and growing and changing more rapidly than ever. She is gaining increasing control over her bodily movements and may even be attempting to roll from her stomach to her back. She is taking great interest in her surroundings and enjoys interacting with other family members. She will delight in experimenting with new speech sounds, adding to her repertoire frequent babbling, giggles and squeals. With a greater ability to communicate and an emerging sense of independence, your baby is also becoming quite adept at expressing her likes and dislikes. Learning new skills can be an exciting time for both you and your baby. It is important to remember that it can also be a time of some frustration. This is understandable and perfectly normal. Just like adults, mastering a new skill takes lots of time and practice. For example, your baby may be able to roll from her tummy to her back, but can't quite manage to go the other way!

What your baby is up to

Movement

- Moves more deliberately as reflex movement decreases
- Raises head when lying on tummy
- Increase in head and neck control
- May roll from stomach on to back
- Explores objects by mouth
- Attempts to grab objects using both hands
- Waves small toys held in the hand

What you can do to support development

Give your baby lots of floor time to practice her newly developed control over arm, leg, chest, and head movements. This should include time on her tummy. She needs to learn to enjoy that position and discover that she can push herself against the floor, strengthening the muscles in her upper body. Similarly, allowing her to push her feet against your hands will strengthen her leg muscles. Initially, she may only want to be on her tummy for short periods of time. This will increase as her skills develop. Remember not to let her sleep on her tummy.

Provide (safe) toys that bounce, jiggle and make sounds. Toys that can be easily grasped and shaken are also appropriate for this age group. Remember your baby puts most things in her mouth.



▲ 4-6 Months continued

What your baby is up to

Language

- Laughs, babbles, and coos with increasing tone and intensity
- Vocalises pleasure with squeals and giggles
- Enjoys the sound of your voice and looking at bright colours and shapes in picture books

Learning and Understanding

- Takes great interest in surroundings
- May have a favourite toy
- Recalls how to play with a toy not seen for several days

What you can do to support development

Talk to your baby. Chat to her about anything. Talk back to her when she babbles. Model new sounds. Routine activities such as nappy changes, feeding, and bathing are ideal opportunities to talk to your baby.

Read to your baby with feeling and expression while showing big, simple pictures of objects and people. It's never too early to introduce her to the pleasure of books.

Singing is another useful activity. Listen to music together while providing rhythmic movement. Repeat simple rhymes and verse while playing with baby's fingers and toes.

Babies develop their inborn learning ability through play. Provide your baby with lots of interesting and varied playthings. Many ordinary objects are perfect for stimulating learning. These include small empty boxes, food, and even the bathwater!

Help your baby to explore new toys. Show her how the toy can be turned, rolled or shaken.

Let your baby know you are pleased with her achievements. Offer smiles and praise particularly when she attempts something new.



▲ 4-6 Months continued

What your baby is up to

Social and Emotional

- Recognises familiar faces
- Smiles and vocalises at own image in mirror
- Starting to develop wariness of strangers and parent separation anxiety

Sleeping

- Sleeps less during the day
- Maybe ready to sleep in a cot
- May have 5-6 hours of unbroken sleep at night

Feeding

- May be ready for transition to solid food at 6 months

What you can do to support development

Enthusiastic responses to your baby's babbles and coos will go a long way in reinforcing her social skills. Similarly, reciprocate her gestures. For example, if she smiles, smile back.

Model social interactions. Provide opportunities for your baby to observe you talking to others.

Wariness of strangers is part of normal development and very common in this age group. If your child is anxious, reassure her – hold her, cuddle her, talk to her.

Although many babies sleep through the night by this age, many do not. Sleep patterns in this age group are still quite variable.

It is recommended that you don't start to offer solid foods until your baby is 6 months old. Let your baby set the pace. Wean your baby gradually and use mealtimes as an opportunity for socialisation. Talk to her. Allow your baby to handle her spoon and to explore her food. This will help her to eventually learn to feed herself.



▲ 6-9 Months

NOW IS the time to baby-proof your home! Babies in this age group have enormous energy and an incredible drive to explore their environment. With increasing mobility however, safety is a major concern. Creating a safe environment in which your baby can satisfy his curiosity requires both vigilance and understanding.

What your baby is up to

Movement

- Progresses from sitting supported to sitting alone
- Pulls to standing position and makes stepping movements when held
- Moves by creeping, rolling, or attempting to crawl
- Claps hands
- Passes objects from one hand to the other
- Pokes at small things with index finger. Begins to point.

Language

- Loves to experiment with sounds. Babbles such as “bababa” are repeated over and over
- Imitates sounds, repeats syllables, responds to conversation with babble
- Uses simple gestures to communicate e.g., shakes head
- Enjoys parents singing simple songs

What you can do to support development

To help your baby practice balancing and sitting alone prop him up using soft cushions or a “boomerang” pillow. You can even sit your baby safely in a laundry basket supported with cushions. With adequate support, your baby may be able to manipulate toys in this position.

When he is ready, allow your child to bear weight on his legs by holding him under the arms or letting him grip furniture that will not move. Be ready to catch him should he lose his balance.

Safety is an important issue once babies are mobile. Take care with stairs and install safety locks on kitchen and bathroom cupboards. Remove potential hazards including furniture with sharp edges. Be extra vigilant when you’re out and about.

Take every opportunity to talk to your baby. Use your baby’s name when you talk to him. Your baby will enjoy hearing you imitate his sounds. Sing to him and chant rhymes. Babies will also enjoy songs accompanied with actions.

Reading with your child will help his vocabulary to grow. Point to pictures and name the objects. Point to and name household items. Take your baby for walks and observe new sights and sounds. Point these out to him and comment on them using simple language and gesture.



▲ 6-9 Months continued

What your baby is up to **Learning and Understanding**

- Recognises partly hidden objects
- Developing awareness of cause and effect
- Likes to drop objects over the side of the cot or high-chair
- Imitates simple actions

Social and Emotional

- Expresses feelings, likes and dislikes
- More selective in whom he smiles at
- Frustrated if activity interrupted or told “no”
- Increases interaction with family members
- Plays simple games
- Shouts for attention
- Wary of unfamiliar people and events
- May become anxious when separated from caregiver

Sleeping

- May have 7-10 hours of unbroken sleep at night
- Daytime sleeps are becoming shorter

Feeding

- Begins to enjoy a wider variety of foods
- May begin to feed himself

What you can do to support development

Now is a great time for playing games like “peek-a-boo”. Play games that challenge his memory. For example, hide a toy behind your back or under a blanket and then ask him to find them. Similarly, your baby will enjoy removing objects placed inside boxes, baskets, and other containers.

Provide him with toys that will stimulate his curiosity. Mirrors (child proof) can be lots of fun too.

It is important to remember that babies differ greatly in their emotional characteristics. For example, some babies are more reactive and more easily frustrated than others. These differences are normal and part of what makes your child an individual.

Your baby will enjoy simple games that involve actions, such as “Peek-a-boo”, “This Little Piggy”, and “Round and Round the Garden”.

Your baby’s protests on separation are perfectly normal. Your baby behaves this way because he can now distinguish between familiar caregivers and others. If he is wary, reassure him with hugs and words of support.

Routines around bedtime can go a long way in helping to establish stable sleep patterns. If you haven’t already started, try setting up a simple bedtime ritual, such as a warm bath followed by quiet time and a story. Be prepared to experiment to find something that works best for you and your baby.

Mealtimes are becoming increasingly messy as your baby attempts to feed himself. Encourage his attempts by letting him hold the spoon. You can also encourage his independence at mealtimes by providing him with easily managed finger-foods. It will be messy, but it is an important part of your baby’s learning. Be philosophical and prepared! Put a plastic tablecloth under his high chair which can be bundled up afterwards.



▲ 9-12 Months

YOU AND your baby have come a long way together over the past twelve months. The baby you brought home not so long ago has grown and developed from a tiny newborn to an active and curious toddler with a growing sense of independence. Not only does she sit, stand, climb, and perhaps even walk, she may also say a word or two. She wants to explore everything and do things for herself. With her growing independence, comes the need to establish rules. Your baby will need your guidance to learn what she can and cannot do.

What your baby is up to

Movement

- Pulls to stand, walks forward and sideways holding a hand
- May stand alone or walk alone
- Able to get up and down stairs with help (and supervision!)
- Manipulates objects freely (turns, pushes, pulls, rolls, pokes, etc)
- Can point with index finger
- Builds a tower of two to three blocks after demonstration

What you can do to support development

Help your baby to build confidence when she takes her first steps. Support her and comfort her when she falls. Give her plenty of praise for her efforts.

With safety in mind, allow your baby to move around using furniture for support. Provide her with toys that can be pushed and pulled. Also, simple ride-on toys that can be pushed along with the feet.

Provide your baby with bright building blocks that are easy to handle. Simple stacking toys are also appropriate for children in this age group. Your child will delight in building small towers which she then happily knocks down.

Your child may enjoy experimenting with scribbling using chunky crayons or chalk. Scribbling will help develop the hand-eye co-ordination needed later for drawing, painting, and writing.



▲ 9-12 Months continued

What your baby is up to

Language

- Small vocabulary of single words, but develops rapidly
- Understands several words and simple instructions associated with gesture e.g., “clap hands”
- Recognises her name when spoken to
- Begins to understand the meaning of “no”
- Reacts vocally to music

Learning and Understanding

- Searches for a hidden object
- Shows recognition of objects appearing after longer periods of time
- Shows great interest in surroundings
- Solves problems through active trial and error

What you can do to support development

Talk to your baby often. Accompany activities of all kinds with simple, relevant conversation.

Use homemade puppets to “talk” to your child.

Listen to your baby’s speech with interest and make eye contact. Respond appropriately. This sets the stage for turn-taking, a basic conversational skill.

Read, read, read! Read simple picture books with bright colours and shapes. Point out and name things. Read the same books over and over again. Your baby will enjoy the familiarity and it will help extend her vocabulary.

Play “hide and seek” with objects of different sizes. Big objects could be hidden under cushions, blankets or even a washing basket. Smaller objects could be hidden in your hand or behind your back.

Go for lots of walks, point out, and talk about things seen on the way.

Another fun outdoor activity is sand and water play. Give your baby plenty of plastic containers of different shapes and sizes to fill and empty. Remember to keep safety in mind and supervise your child at all times.

Give your baby things to play with that differ in texture and smell. Make your own “touch and feel” book from odds and ends around the house. Include materials of different textures, such as cardboard, sandpaper, bubble-wrap, and cotton-wool.

Objects that can be manipulated (e.g., playdough) are also useful at this age.



▲ 9-12 Months continued

What your baby is up to

Social and Emotional

- Expresses many emotions and recognises them in others
- Developing ability to trust
- Likes to show affection and always be near parents
- Helps with dressing (holds out arm for sleeve and foot for shoe)
- Enjoys simple action games
- Imitates a model more deliberately and precisely e.g. holding phone to ear

Sleeping

- Settling into routine sleep and wake times, but may still wake at night
- Has 1-2 daytime naps

Feeding

- Eats much of the same food as the rest of the family
- Able to hold a spoon although not yet ready to feed herself

What you can do to support development

Your baby will enjoy any activity that involves social interaction between the two of you. This could include action games such as “This Little Piggy” and “Round and Round the Garden”.

Your child may now be ready to help with dressing and undressing. She will be slow at first as her skills require practice. So give her plenty of time and encouragement as she takes this important step towards independence.

Continue with bedtime rituals, including a favourite story.

Allow your baby to try foods with different textures, tastes, and smells. Provide her with finger foods. This will help develop her co-ordination and will maintain her interest during mealtimes. Remember that supervision with finger-foods is just as important as supervision at mealtimes.



▲ 12-18 Months

YOUR BABY is now a toddler with boundless energy and enthusiasm! He will want to investigate just about everything and do things “his way”. He will want to try and dress and feed himself, and to help with the household chores. He will delight in climbing the furniture, opening and closing doors, and emptying cupboards and drawers! There are many fun ways you can encourage his growing independence, but he will need close supervision. Now is a good time to re-check your child-proofing and update as necessary.

What your baby is up to

Movement

- Walks with legs widespread
- May be able to bend down and pick up a toy while standing
- Begins to show preference for one hand
- Builds tower of three or four blocks

What you can do to support development

Your baby’s struggles to take his first steps may now be well rewarded. This will be an exciting time for him. Praise his accomplishments and give him plenty of opportunity to practice his newfound skill.

Provide him with stable ride-on toys and large balls to roll, kick, and bounce. Push and pull-along toys will help to improve his balance and co-ordination. Give him plenty of space to move around and develop his skills.

Remember that children vary greatly in the age at which they begin to walk. Encourage and support your baby, and he will walk when he is ready.



▲ 12-18 Months continued

What your baby is up to

Language

- Gesture still important for communicating
- May say 6-12 recognisable words, although he understands many more
- Uses words and urgent vocalisations to make wants known
- Comprehends simple questions

Learning and Understanding

- Enjoys learning names of body parts; eyes, nose, mouth, etc.
- Starts to use imagination in play e.g., pretends to drink from an empty cup
- Points to things he likes and wants
- Uses pencils and crayons to scribble

What you can do to support development

Like walking, language skills vary widely. While many children have said their first word by 12 months, others don't reach this stage until a few months later.

Encourage your baby's language development by responding to his sounds. Talk to him about anything! Discuss what you're doing, what he's doing, describe daily events, toys, food, etc.

Read to your baby. Use simple picture books. Name colours, shapes, animals. Put together a family photo album. Point out and talk about different family members.

Toddlers love repetition. Sing songs and rhymes over and over. Try leaving out the last word in familiar songs. Your baby will enjoy supplying the missing word on cue.

Play simple games to learn the names of body parts. Touch or tickle a foot or hand while naming it. Ask your child to point to his nose, ear, tummy, etc.

Pretend play lays the foundation for advanced thinking skills. Encourage pretend play by showing your child how much fun it is to talk to teddy bears, dolls, or puppets. Answer the toy phone. Have a tea party together. Show your support by asking questions – "Is that a cake you're making? Can I try some?"



▲ 12-18 Months continued

What your baby is up to

Social and Emotional

- Wants to be more independent and do things “his way”
- Easily frustrated
- Temper tantrums are common
- Interested in other children, although plays separately from them
- Increasing self-awareness e.g., recognises self in mirror; uses words such as “me”, “him”, and “he” to refer to self
- May develop specific fears e.g., large animals
- May protest if parent or caregiver leaves

Sleeping

- One daytime nap may now be enough
- With so much to see and do, settling down for sleep at night may be met with some resistance

Feeding

- Uses a cup for drinking
- May still be a little awkward with a spoon
- Finger feeds well

What you can do to support development

Encourage your child’s self-help efforts by including him in everyday activities. Allow him to feed himself, help with dressing, and carry out simple fetch-and-carry activities. His efforts will leave him feeling proud and competent.

Expect spills and accidents with early attempts at self-help. When time is an issue, allow for delays by anticipating the extra time needed for your child to do things on his own.

Foster your baby’s sense of self by using his name and making eye contact when you talk to him.

A predictable and unhurried bedtime routine will help your baby settle down for the night. Check his room for comfort and avoid stimulating activities close to bedtime. A warm bath followed by a bedtime story or a soothing song may help him to fall off to sleep.

Give your baby plenty of opportunity to master using a spoon. While this can sometimes be tedious and time-consuming, not to mention messy, it will encourage his emerging sense of independence.



▲ References & further reading

Books

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Useful WebSites

N.S.W. Parenting Centre
www.parenting.nsw.gov.au

Tresillian Family Care Centres
www.tresillian.net

Zero to Three, National Centre for Infants, Toddlers & Families
www.zerotothree.org



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Tresillian Family Care Centres are funded through the NSW Department of Health. The Centres offer a broad range of services to parents with children under 5 years of age. Services include a 24-hour Parent Help Line, Outreach, Day Stay, Residential, and Education Services. Parents come to Tresillian if they are experiencing parenting problems, such as infant feeding and sleeping difficulties, toddler behaviour problems, and postnatal mood disorders.

THE TRESILLIAN HOME VISITING INTERVENTION PROJECT

The Tresillian Home Visiting Intervention Project was investigating the impact of providing regular visits to mothers and their infants during an 8-month period. This project was funded by a Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services – Early Intervention Parenting Project Grant and a research grant from Macquarie University.

For parenting advice in NSW contact Tresillian's Parent Help Line on 02 9787 0855 (Sydney metropolitan area) or toll free on 1800 637 357 (Rural NSW).

For on-line advice, visit ninemsn.com.au/messengermums





Tresillian Family Care Centres
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Tresillian 24 hour Parent's Help Line
02 9787 9855 or 1800 637 357 (Freecall outside Sydney)

For on-line parenting advice visit
ninemsn.com.au/messengermums (Limited hours)

Email: tresillian@sswahs.nsw.gov.au
www.tresillian.net