



# Caring for Infants & Toddlers

## *What Parents & Providers Need to Know*

Handout #46

*Healthy Children, Strong Families, Caring Communities*

### **This handout discusses:**

- **Different activities that support healthy development**
- **Brain development**
- **Resources that help you support healthy development**

All children need a child care setting where they can thrive with providers who understand how to promote healthy growth and development. The best situation for a baby's overall development is one in which he has a nurturing, supportive environment with caring and attentive adults. Children thrive when their social, emotional and physical needs are met by warm and actively loving people who hold them, talk to them, sing, read and allow them to safely explore.

### **Temperaments:**

Infants each are unique, just as adults are. We all have different temperaments. This is the way we see and react to the world around us. One person may be outgoing while another is cautious and slow to warm up. All children have areas of strength and areas where they need more support. It is important for providers to adapt their approach with each child and to be responsive to meet children's needs. Recognizing a child's temperament will help you understand the child and will help you respond in ways that support his healthy development. Find out what he likes and how much he wants to be cuddled, touched and engaged. Infants can't use words to communicate their moods, preferences or needs, but they send signals to the adults who care for them. The sounds they make, their facial expressions and the way they make or avoid eye contact are all clues to what they want and need. By paying close attention to an infant's need for stimulation, as well as quiet time, and by modifying our reactions, secure attachments will form and the infant will learn to self-soothe and calm himself.

### **Brain development:**

The first three years of life are a period of intense growth in all areas of a

child's development. The foundation begins in infancy for learning language and communication skills, developing feelings of self-worth, and acquiring the motivation to learn and get along with others. Special scanning equipment has allowed researchers to see how the brain actually grows and develops. We know an infant is born with 100 billion nerve cells (neurons) that form connections (synapses) with other neurons in order to develop systems for sight, hearing, movement and expressing emotion. All of these neurons are present at birth but only those connections that are frequently used will become strengthened and continue to form a unique individual who will love to learn.

Early care specialists have discovered certain things that parents and providers can do with their babies that actually cause the baby's brain to form the connections it needs to develop to its full potential.

Activities that support brain development in infants and toddlers include:

- Affection
- Touch
- Communication, reading and music
- Stimulating experiences and safe exploration

### **Affection:**

Unconditional love creates strong self esteem and increased development of brain circuitry and in turn, self esteem gives a child the courage he needs to interact with and learn from the world around him. When parents or providers respond with food or warmth or comfort, the baby tends to be calmed. By responding to a newborn's needs, the brain begins to create the network of brain cells that help the baby learn

to soothe himself. Babies whose needs are met have the best chance at success in later life. After all, newborns have just come from a warm, snug place where they could hear and feel the rhythmic beating of their mother's heart, and where they were never hungry or cold. Before birth, everything was regulated. After birth when the baby is hungry, uncomfortable or upset in his new environment, the brain's stress-response systems turn on and release stress hormones. The baby expresses his distress by crying.

### **Touch:**

Holding, rocking and cuddling a child communicates love and acceptance better than anything else. Touch helps infants gain a sense of calmness and encourages brain development. Researchers have discovered that premature infants who were massaged grew faster, cried less and were released from the hospital earlier than those who weren't. From this finding we understand that most babies will benefit from gentle touching. Holding and stroking an infant stimulates the brain to release important hormones necessary for growth.

### **Communication, Reading and Music:**

The first three years of exploring and playing with books, singing nursery rhymes, listening to stories, recognizing words and scribbling are truly the building blocks for language and literacy development. Babies love the sound of your voice and prefer speech to other sounds. It is in hearing your words repeatedly in early conversations that a child's language capacity grows. Engaging infants and toddlers in communication begins to provide a solid basis for later success in learning. Hearing your familiar voice also reassures an infant of your closeness and love.

#### **Communication**

Each day offers windows of learning for children. When dressing a child, remember to name articles of clothing and colors. While preparing a meal, talk about what you're doing and allow toddlers to play with plastic dishes or Tupperware containers and lids. Whenever possible, name things that are the same, different, bigger, smaller, hot or cold. When driving in the car or going for a walk, point out and talk about birds, trees, familiar stores, cars, trucks and signs. The more adults talk with babies and toddlers, the sooner most will learn to talk. They need to hear clear, simple repetitive language about what is going on now and what will happen next.

For example, "I'm going to change your diaper now. Let's put you on the table and get you cleaned up." The high pitch and exaggerated tones of "baby talk" help babies learn the basic sounds of language. When we copy baby's sounds, facial expressions and body movements, we build a bridge for two-way communication.

#### **Reading**

Talking and reading to infants and young children who don't seem to understand your words yet may not seem important, but these conversations stimulate the parts of a child's brain responsible for speech and language development. When reading to your baby let him turn the pages in whatever order he wants and however fast he wants. Buy sturdy board books or cloth books so that you don't need to restrict the baby from putting them in his mouth. Hearing a story over and over again helps a child learn about word sounds, meaning and rhythms. Learning happens with repetition and helps a child feel safe and secure.

#### **Music**

Music supports many developing skills. It can build relationships, provide comfort, foster language development, launch creativity, develop fine and large muscles and build coordination. Captivated by the pattern of your voice, they may watch you intently, try to imitate your sounds, or wave and kick with delight. Young toddlers can participate in a song by clapping, bouncing or swaying with your help. They may try to dance or sing, or enjoy exploring the sounds of musical toys. Older toddlers will love musical games and songs with stories and motions. They may even want to act out songs with dances, directed movement (hokey pokey) and props.

### **Exploration:**

Natural loving, responsive care-giving seems to provide babies with the ideal environment for encouraging their own exploration, which is always the best environment for learning. If a child is curious about colors and paints, animals or big trucks, you'll be helping his brain develop by finding ways to explore what he most wants to learn about. Let the baby safely explore as much as possible. Gently expose the baby to different textures, temperatures, scents and sounds.

## Suggestions for Activities

**The Environment** – During the early years, when babies' brains develop so quickly, they need to have interesting things to watch, copy, reach for, touch, taste, listen to and smell in a relaxed, unhurried way. All these sensations and movements cause more brain cells to grow and connect with one another, enabling complex reasoning down the line. On the other hand, babies can also get too much stimulation, which can make them fussy because they are tired and overwhelmed. The goal is to find a balance of stimulation and rest for each baby.

Pay attention to whether baby looks and reaches for more or turns away to take a break.

**The Caregiver's Role** – The caregiver is often the most interesting object in any baby's environment. Ideally, in playing with babies, adults take the lead about half the time and follow and imitate what babies do the rest of the time. Take turns making faces and sounds. Help babies feel successful by offering activities that are interesting but not too hard. Remember that some babies get tired, frustrated or discouraged more quickly than others. Follow the baby's pace.

|                       | Baby-friendly Environment   | Activities   |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| <b>All Ages</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A quiet corner for the sensitive child who needs a break from the general activity</li> <li>• A separate sleeping area for those who need a quiet place to sleep</li> <li>• Some, but not too many, interesting things to explore</li> <li>• Comfortable places for caregiver and baby to relax together</li> <li>• Careful childproofing</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nursery rhymes – Humpty Dumpty, etc.</li> <li>• Singing and music games – The Wheels On the Bus, Itsy Bitsy Spider, Where is Thumbkin? (Loud background music or noise may distract babies from hearing and learning speech.)</li> <li>• Learning games – Pat-a-Cake, This Little Piggy</li> <li>• Physical contact – rocking, holding, bouncing on knees, stroking, snuggling and caressing</li> <li>• Baby massage and picture books</li> </ul> |
| <b>Under 6 Months</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A safe place to sit and watch, listen and touch interesting things</li> <li>• Outdoor time for observing</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let babies hold and manipulate toys, such as kitchen spatulas, wooden spoons, plastic dishes, crumpled paper, board books, etc.</li> <li>• Babies need “tummy time” while awake to build strong arms and necks</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Over 6 Months</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe places for babies to roll around in</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let infants look at themselves in a mirror</li> <li>• Peek-a-boo, finger plays and nursery rhymes</li> <li>• Look at picture books together, point to and name pictures</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Once Crawling</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Space to crawl</li> <li>• Support (e.g. edge of a sofa) while learning to walk</li> <li>• Things to climb on, such as large pillows or the bottom two steps of carpeted stairs</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let baby play with objects which fit one inside the other, like a set of plastic bowls</li> <li>• Let baby roll and chase balls</li> <li>• Provide buckets and bowls to fill and dump with sand or water</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Once Walking</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A safe play structure, infant swings or other means to practice physical skills</li> <li>• Small table/chairs for eating and drawing</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let baby pull toys (a box with a string) or push toys (a toy stroller with stuffed animals or a doll)</li> <li>• Let babies play in safe outdoor play space with a sand box and infant swings</li> </ul>  |

\* The above section is reprinted thanks to BANANAS. Inc., Oakland, CA from the BANANAS Choosing Child Care handout entitled *What Babies need in Child Care Birth to One Year* and *What Toddlers Need in Child Care Ages 1-2 Years*.

## Suggestions for Activities

**The Environment** – Toddlers need outdoor and indoor space to play actively. Some need a quiet place, somewhat away from the action, where they can relax and watch. Many sleep more easily when in a separate, quiet space, so provide a calm place to sleep. The goal is a balance between an environment that is interesting, but not overwhelming. (Some children get more easily overwhelmed than others by too much color or sound.) Pictures of toddlers and their families help youngsters remember that their parents will indeed return.

**How to Play** – Toddlers learn from active involvement with any material. But they learn much more when adults often talk and play *with* them, rather than just watch them play. Adults can gradually build the attention span of older toddlers (age 2 or 2 1/2) by pointing out new and interesting things to do with the same object. Adults can alternate between showing new possibilities (“If you turn the box over, you’ll see how it opens”) and praising youngsters for doing something new (“You opened the box!”). Caregivers can demonstrate imaginative play, such as rocking a baby doll to sleep or saying “varoom varoom” while moving a car.

| Skills              | Activities  |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Language</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage children to talk, sing, imitate sounds of animals, birds and trucks.</li> <li>• Discuss books with easy-to-turn pages. Toddlers learn more when they can point, name pictures and answer questions, such as “Where is the pony?” (Finishing the book is less important than stimulating discussion)</li> <li>• Encourage conversations with finger plays, felt boards and puppets</li> <li>• Take walks around the block and talk about everything you see</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Small Muscle</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide large crayons, washable markers, tempera paint – toddlers love to see the designs that appear after their hands dance across the paper</li> <li>• Encourage water play with plastic cups, ladles, funnels, sieves, pumps and sponges in a sink or bucket</li> <li>• Let toddlers play in sand with toys for digging, pouring, sifting and building</li> <li>• Provide playdough for mashing and rolling</li> <li>• Provide a hammer and “peg bench,” building blocks and little cars that are easy to hold, wind-up toys for manipulation, wooden trains and tracks</li> </ul> |
| <b>Large Muscle</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let toddlers dance, play drums, chase or play hide-and-seek or “wrestle” with a gentle adult</li> <li>• Provide toys to pull (a string tied to a box), to push and ride on (without pedals)</li> <li>• Provide safe places to climb - a sofa, small slide or climbing structure</li> <li>• Provide things to crawl through, such as a blanket over a low table</li> <li>• Take children on a walk around the block or to a nearby toddler playground or library</li> </ul>   |

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### Resources available in the Child Action, Inc. Lending Library:

- Choosing Quality Inclusive Care, handout 46
- Touchpoints, The Essential Reference, T. Berry Brazelton
- Your Baby and Child From Birth to Age 5, Penelope Leach
- Games to Play with Babies, Jackie Silberg
- Right from Birth, Building Your Child’s Foundation for Life, Craig and Sharon Ramey

- 2’s Sensory Play Experiences, Liz and Dick Wilmes
- The Creative Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers, Amy Laura Dombro, Laura J. Colker, Diane Trister Dodge
- What’s Going on in There? How the Brain and Mind Develop the First Five Years of Life, Lise Eliot
- Infant and Toddler Experiences, Fran Hast, Ann Hollyfield
- More Infant and Toddler Experiences, Fran Hast, Ann Hollyfield