



Families ... generations of strength

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Your Child's Brain: The Crucial First Years

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In the 1970s and 80s, we thought the genes we were born with determined how our brains developed. But recent research on brain chemistry using new technologies is showing us that the brain develops as a result of interplay between a child's heredity and the experiences he/she has during childhood. In 1994, the Carnegie Corporation of New York released the report *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Young Children*. It documented the literature on development and concluded "how children function from the preschool years all the way through adolescence, and even adulthood, hinges in large part on their experience before the age of three."

We've learned that because the brain is remarkably unfinished at birth, these early experiences actually affect the way a child's brain becomes "wired." Relationships with parents and caregivers, the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings children experience, and the challenges they meet all help determine the structure of the brain. Ultimately, this shapes the way children learn, think, and behave for the rest of their lives.

Well then, just how do parents and other caregivers raise healthy, happy children and confident, competent learners? Research in brain development and school readiness suggests the following 10 guidelines.

Be warm, loving, and responsive.

"Secure attachments" are the basis of all the child's future relationships. When children receive warm, responsive care, they feel safe and secure. Because babies experience relationships through their senses, it's the expression of love that affects how a young child's brain is "wired" and helps to shape later learning and behavior. So please, go ahead and hold, touch, rock, sing, and smile at children. They will grow to be more curious, get along better with other children, and perform better in school than children who are less securely attached.

Respond to the child's cues and clues.

Infants send many signals to adults who care for them without saying a word. Among the cues and clues they send are the sounds they make, the way they move, their facial expressions, and the way they make or avoid eye contact. Children become securely attached and begin to trust when someone smiles back at them, comforts them when they are upset, and feeds them when they are hungry. In fact, infants who receive quick and warm responses to expressed needs, typically learn to cry much less and sleep more at night. At the same time, when babies are calmed by being comforted or fed, the brain's stress-response systems are turned off. Babies' brains begin to create the network of cells that help them learn to soothe themselves. You **cannot** spoil a newborn baby by responding to his/her needs.

Talk, read, and sing to your child.

All "conversations" give a child a solid basis for later learning. Describing the daily routines of diaper changes and bath times are important. When babies hear words over and over, the parts of the brain that handle speech and language develop. The more language they hear in these conversations, the more those parts of the brain will grow and develop. Read simple picture books to babies without trying to 'teach' them at first. With older babies and toddlers, read stories in a way that encourages them to participate — repeat rhymes and refrains so they can do the same.

Establish routines and rituals.

Repeated positive experiences, like story and song before nap, or juice and crackers before going home, provide children with a sense of security. Because children learn from repetition, strong connections form between neurons in the brain helping

a child learn what to expect from this environment and how to understand the world around him. Children who have safe and predictable interactions with others have also been found to do better in school later on.

Encourage safe exploration and play.

Parents/caregivers are the child's whole world for the first months of life. These interactions form the basis of all subsequent learning. As they begin to explore and play, be receptive when the child needs to return to you for security.

Make TV watching selective.

Studies show that children who learn best in school have families who limit the amount of time they spend in front of the TV and are selective as to the kind of shows they watch. Don't use TV as a baby-sitter. Children need an adult to watch with them. Talk about what is viewed so it will become a learning experience for children.

Use discipline as an opportunity to teach.

As children explore their ever-expanding world, they need limits and consistent, loving adult supervision. But don't expect young kids to always do what is said. They are normally impulsive and will hit, yell, or fall apart at times — because their feelings of frustration and anger exceed their ability to control themselves. Helping children learn self-control takes time. Many approaches to setting limits can work as long as they are intended to teach children rather than punish them.

Never hit or shake a child. Brain research has shown that hitting/shaking can have long-term negative effects. This kind of interaction teaches fear, humiliation, rage, and that violence is an acceptable way of reacting. Take time out for yourself, count to 10, or call a friend for support.

When you do overreact or discipline too harshly, tell the child you made a mistake and are sorry. This will help repair the connection in order for the child to continue to feel loved and supported.

Recognize that each child is unique.

Carrying different temperaments and growth rates, children must be recognized for their individual accomplishments with specific praise. They will then begin to see the connections between their actions and your response. Parents who are sensitive to a child's cues and clues will encourage positive self-esteem.

Choose quality child care and stay involved.

Research shows that high-quality child care and early education can boost children's learning and social skills when they enter school. To make a good choice of child care, visit and observe how providers respond and interact with the babies/children in their care. Do they genuinely care about children, offering them individual attention and room to explore? Is the setting clean and safe? Carefully check the provider's references. After choosing a care setting, occasionally stop in unannounced to see what the child's world is like during the day. Offer constructive suggestions and expect progress reports.

Take care of yourself.

Taking care of children is the most important, most wonderful, and often the most challenging job in our society. When you are exhausted, preoccupied, irritable, depressed, or overwhelmed, it is much harder to meet the needs of young children. Treatment will help both parents and children.

Reach out and get some help.

The new brain research informs us of the uppermost importance of the relationship between caregiver and child in the first years of life, and affords us a wonderful opportunity to enrich the lives of our children and help them realize their full potential. The first years truly last forever.

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