

Caring parents in the first year stimulate a baby's growth

Just like snowflakes, no two infants are exactly alike. A baby grows and develops at his or her own rate. However, sometimes adults expect babies to roll over, sit up, walk or talk at the same age.

At one time or another, you may have probably worried that your baby is not growing and developing at a normal rate compared to other children the same age. It is important to note that the average ages given for certain developmental stages are just that — averages that can vary by as much as six months from one child to the next. The key is not to compare your child to others. Think of your child as the individual he or she is, and accept the differences that make every child unique.

The people who study children look at three distinct, but interrelated areas — physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development. Physical development includes the body's growth. Cognitive development involves learning, reasoning and problem-solving. Social and emotional development looks at a child's feelings and how they interact with others.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIRST YEAR

Your child grows faster in the first two years than any other time in life. By five months, birth weight doubles; it triples by one year. The brain is also growing very rapidly.

• To support physical development:

Give your baby objects to hold, poke, wave and grab. Make sure the objects are too big to

fit in your baby's mouth.

Strengthen neck muscles by playing games where she moves her eyes and head from side to side. You might move a toy slowly back and forth in front of her face.

Babyproof everything! Store toxic substances such as dish washer detergent, makeup, paint or medicine up high. Put safety latches on cabinets, and put covers on electrical outlets. Lower crib mattresses so an older infant can't fall over the rail. Cover sharp corners of tables or shelves that your infant might bump into.

Give your baby the freedom to move around. Young infants enjoy being on their back so they can kick, wiggle and look around. Older infants need practice crawling, creeping, pulling up and walking.

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PARENTING POINTS

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COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: REASONING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Your infant uses her senses to think, learn, and solve problems. Activities that require touching and feelings and objects that are different sizes and shapes help her learn and problem-solve. It is important that she is exposed to varying sounds and colours.

• To support cognitive development:

Read colourful picture books with your baby. He will enjoy cuddling on your lap and hearing the rhythm of your voice. With time he will begin to understand that words have meaning and can be used to identify objects.

Provide interesting objects for your baby to mouth and explore. Square nylon scarves, plastic measuring cups, large wooden spoons, and colourful washcloths are favourite household toys.

Play peek-a-boo. This can be good practice for saying goodbye and helping your baby learn that you will be back.

Play hide-and-seek games to help your baby learn that objects exist, even when they cannot be seen.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: FEELINGS AND INTERACTION

Many basic emotions are present at infancy. From a very young age your baby can show you how he is feeling — happy, excited, upset or bored.

• To support social and emotional development:

Help your baby develop a sense of trust and security by responding to his cries. Feeling secure encourages him to try new things. Be consistent so he knows what to expect.

Label your baby's facial expressions and talk about his emotional experiences. Give meaning to his communication efforts. If he smiles and grunts, say, "Oh, you smiled! You must be happy!"

Talk to your baby. Face her and talk to her so she can see you and your smile. Talk about what you are doing, familiar objects or people. You might even want to babble back or echo sounds your baby makes as much as you would in a regular conversation. Even though your infant cannot understand everything you say, she will be learning many words that will form the basis for language later on.

Stay with your baby when someone new is around. Encourage strangers to approach slowly. Introduce your baby and let her explore someone new in the safety of your presence.

The first year of life is an exciting time for both you and your baby. One of the most important things you can do is to assure your baby that when she is hungry, she will be fed and when uncomfortable, sick or afraid, she will be comforted.

Research shows that children who are loved, nurtured and given positive attention are more likely to be healthy (emotionally and physically), demonstrate positive behaviour and learn at a normal rate.