

## HELPING YOUR BABY TO DEVELOP DURING THE VITAL FIRST YEAR

Many parents, both those who have been through a neonatal unit and those who haven't, will often worry about how their child's development is going. It's totally understandable if you feel anxious about this.

Babies have an amazing capacity to learn, but because parents may not know how to best stimulate them, they may not gain important learning skills that will stand them in good stead for the future. There are many things that parents can do to help their baby learn and develop. Here are a few essentials that really do make a difference.

**NOTE:** As with all of our material, before proceeding be sure to check with your primary health carer to ensure any activity is appropriate for your baby.

### Tummy time

Five minutes of 'Tummy Time' two or three times a day can have a positive effect on head shape and brain development. It also leads on to crawling, an intellectually important milestone not to be missed. For babies who find tummy time uncomfortable, the following strategies may help: place baby on his tummy for a nappy change; place a favourite toy a few inches from his head and call attention to it; get down on the floor and make funny sounds to encourage him to lift up his head; place your baby across your thighs and pat his back.



### Crawling

Crawling stimulates left and right brain development, improves overall health, stimulates the immune system and helps the eyes work together as a team (crucial for later reading). Activities such as pillow-mountains, play tunnels and interesting toys placed just out of reach will encourage your baby to crawl. Don't worry if your baby crawls backwards. This just means that the muscles in his forearms are stronger than those in his legs!

### Language

Talk to your baby during daily routine activities such as feeding, bath time and nappy changing. Respond to any sounds that your baby makes with praise and encouragement. Use simple speech that is easy for your baby to imitate and allow him time to respond. Sing lullabies, songs and nursery rhymes to introduce new words and to encourage listening skills and repeat them regularly. Read and reread picture and story books that focus on sounds and rhymes. Make animal sounds - babies love them!



### Games

Time-honoured games such as 'Pat-a-cake', 'Peek-a-boo' and 'Pop goes the weasel' are lovely ways to stimulate smiles and giggles. Research shows that having fun with baby improves socialisation skills and leads to a love of sports and games in later life.

### Textures

Mouthing and touching objects are fundamental ways in which babies learn about weight, taste, smell and temperature. You can invite exploration by introducing your baby to materials with different textures such as citrus fruits, fabrics and household objects. Everyday objects such as leather purses and bags will also provide endless opportunities for learning and discovery. However, if an object fits through a kitchen roll cylinder then it is not safe. Homemade or everyday objects must be carefully supervised and removed from the cot during daytime naps and at bedtime.



## Touch

Studies show that lack of physical contact can lead to health, sleep and relationship disorders in later life. So take every opportunity to hold, carry, rock, stroke, caress and cuddle and kiss your baby. Holding your baby close will also help you tune into his needs and he will know that he is loved and wanted.



## Exercise

Exercise is very important to keep your baby healthy and to develop and strengthen muscles in preparation for sitting, crawling and walking. Babies love rowing and cycling exercises and being massaged from head to toe. The best time to introduce an exercise activity is just after a bath or nappy change when your baby's arms and legs are unrestricted by clothing. Besides developing body awareness and co-ordination, exercise can also relieve stress and tension in the joints during growth spurts.

## Ideas for play

Simple home-made toys are often more effective than bought toys. The advantage is that there is always room for adaptation and ingenuity. Here are some tried and tested ideas that are really worth trying:

- ✓ fill a tissue box with ribbons or fabric to tempt your baby to investigate
- ✓ put your hand inside a sock to make a talking puppet
- ✓ partially fill a plastic container with pasta or rice (secure the lid) to make a musical instrument. Babies can see and hear the contents, but cannot swallow them.



There are hundreds of simple and effective activities that can aid learning and development in the first year of life. Parents who want to find out more can attend Baby Sensory classes. Activities are accompanied by developmental theory to illustrate perfectly the stage at which a baby is functioning. This helps parents understand what to expect from their babies and how best to facilitate their play and learning.

## Final thought

The most important thing is that you enjoy spending time bonding and getting to know your baby. If at any time you are concerned about your child's development in any way please speak to your GP as there are many early intervention services available who can help support you and your baby.

## A special thanks

The Neonatal Trust would like to acknowledge, and thank, Baby Sensory and Founder Dr Lin Day for their help with producing this resource.

Dr Lin Day (PhD, M.Phil, PGCE, BSc, Dip Ed), is one of the UK's leading parenting experts and a renowned author within the field of childcare and education. With over 35 years of practical experience working with parents and children and driven by the passion and commitment to offer the best possible service, Dr Lin Day developed Baby Sensory and Baby Sensory Foundations to provide the support and knowledge necessary to lead baby learning and development forwards in the most important year of life (and ran classes herself for 9 years).

**Baby Sensory™**  
Precious Early Learning for Babies