

## Positive Experiences

Exposing your child to many new experiences helps her brain to build new connections. These new experiences can come through everyday activities with your child. Remember that you are the “best toy” in the room!

- **Talk to your child.** Children need to hear language from birth. As your child grows, the best experiences are ones that she takes part in. Play rhyming games. Tell each other stories. Expand on her words (e.g., “Yes, that’s a kitty. A big, white kitty.”).
- **Read to your child.** Books are a great way to increase their language skills and expand their imagination, and it provides an opportunity for positive, nurturing interaction with your child.

**Sing with your child.** Share music, sing songs, dance, or march with your child. Young children love silly songs and playing with words. Listening to and making music can help her form the same connections in her brain that will be later used to learn math in school.

- **Play with your child.** Play is how young children learn.
  - Set up play dates with other children. Children need social interactions to enhance their brain development.
  - Encourage physical movement and activities. Children learn through “allow time” for running, climbing, and other physical play.
  - Encourage your child’s creativity. Art offers sensory experiences and helps build thinking skills.
  - Give your child challenges, but make sure they are right for your child’s age. If they are too easy, they won’t create learning experiences and if they are too hard, they will only frustrate your child and create stress.
- **Look for high quality childcare.** Next to family, caregivers can do the most to help your child’s brain grow and develop.

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

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health information

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# Early Brain Development



At birth, all of your baby's organs, except the brain, are fully developed.

### **What do we know about a baby's brain?**

Your baby's brain has more than 100 billion brain cells at birth. Some of these cells are already linked together so that the body can control the functions it needs to survive (e.g., beating of the heart, breathing by the lungs).

Other connections form during the first few months and years of life. These connections shape your baby's feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.

As your child has different kinds of experiences and those experiences are repeated over and over, the connections in the brain related to those experiences become stronger.

By the time your child is three, the brain has made many more connections than it needs. To be more efficient, the brain begins to cut away weak and rarely used connections.

This is a normal part of development and happens in all pre-schoolers. However, when the brain is not routinely exposed to new experiences, there are more of these weak or rarely used connections. From the moment she is born, your baby is using the experiences she takes in

through her senses to build brain connections. For that reason, the kind of care she gets plays a big role in how her brain becomes "hardwired".

You can make a difference in how your baby's brain develops!

When you read to her, play with her, and respond sensitively to her cries, you are helping to develop her brain. Life experiences can permanently change the structure of her brain.

Some areas of your child's brain will continue to develop throughout her lifetime; however, there are times during childhood when certain parts of the brain are more sensitive and ready for learning new information. This is why early experiences have such a strong effect on your child's later behaviour and learning.

### **Building a Brain**

Your child's developing brain needs:

- a safe environment
- positive experiences

### **A Safe Environment – The Foundation**

When a child feels stress, the brain responds by producing a chemical called cortisol. High levels of cortisol can destroy brain cells and some of the

connections in the brain. Here are some suggestions to reduce your child's stress:

- ***Create a safe physical environment*** – Remove any possible injury risks—“baby proof” your house.
- ***Create predictable daily routines*** – This helps your child know what to expect from her world and helps her feel secure.
- ***Respond when he needs you*** – Stay calm. A loving approach can help your child feel secure. This is very important when she is physically hurt, sick, or emotionally upset.
- ***Stay “in tune” with her feelings*** – This will help her build feelings of trust and security. Watch what she does and listen to what she says. Think about what she might be feeling and ask yourself how you could respond in a way that lets her know you understand.
- ***Reduce your stress*** – Children are very sensitive to stress in their environment. If you are stressed they will be stressed. If you feel stressed, do something to reduce it. Call a supportive friend or family member. Ask someone to care for your child for a few hours while you take some time for yourself.