



HELPING YOUR BABY LEARN

Even from birth, your baby is an active and eager learner! Most of what babies learn in the early years comes through social interactions with their family members and caregivers and through active exploration of their environment. Babies are motivated to learn by play and communicating with others because they are very social by nature. They also like to learn by hands-on sensory experiences. That is why you see babies mouthing objects, feeling and touching objects, and banging and waving things around. Here are some tips for helping your baby learn.

1. *Provide contingent, responsive environments* to help babies learn best. Contingent stimulation or feedback means that when the baby does something, something happens. For instance, if the baby cries, a parent comes running. Other examples include the following:
 - If the baby waves a rattle, it makes a noise.
 - If the baby pinches a squeaker toy, it squeaks.
 - If the baby pushes a button, something pops up or squeaks.

All of these situations provide contingent feedback to the baby. It is also important that the feedback comes immediately after the baby does something—not minutes later.

2. *Allow babies to explore and to be active learners.* Environments that provide immediate responses to a baby's actions allow the baby to make the connection between his or her actions and its outcomes. In this way, babies learn that they can have control over their worlds. This sense of control is essential to their motivation to learn and their feelings of self-worth later on. Babies who have everything done for them regardless of their actions or babies who do not have opportunities for initiation and exploration may withdraw from learning situations or not initiate any such situations.
3. *Help babies learn by doing.* Babies need lots of opportunities to physically manipulate, handle, and explore objects. They need to be able to act on objects rather than being acted on or always having things done to or for them. For instance, give the baby a rattle and let him or her shake it. If the baby does not figure it out at first, demonstrate, then give the baby a chance to try. If the parent or caregiver stands and shakes the rattle constantly at the baby, the baby will probably tune out of the activity and not learn how to do this action.
4. *Make daily activities and routines into learning opportunities for your baby.* You do not necessarily need to set aside a special time for "teaching." Just like all of us, babies learn all the time through what they do. Playing games and talking with your baby while you are diapering or dressing him or her or when you are doing household chores can be ideal ways of helping your baby learn. You can turn any caregiving routine or interaction into an opportunity for learning. For instance, when you are diapering, play Peekaboo or give your baby a toy to hold and shake. When you are doing your household chores, talk to your baby about what you are doing and see whether you can get him or her to watch you for a while or get a conversation going, cooing back and forth.
5. *Provide new and/or expanded experiences and opportunities* for the baby to learn. Babies who are able to stay awake and alert for a while can benefit from new experiences. Just watch for your baby's stress cues or signals to take a break, and give him or her a rest when it is needed. It often feels difficult at first to find that balance between providing your baby with



HELPING YOUR BABY LEARN (continued)

new experiences and overstimulation. Babies can never take bombardments of stimulation. You can carefully watch your baby's cues to find out how much input or activity to provide and when.

6. *Organize or structure the baby's environment to guide his or her development.* You can provide an interesting and responsive environment to your baby, present new things, monitor the environment to protect your baby from danger or too much stimulation, and encourage him or her to learn new things.

KEY POINTS

- Babies learn through social situations.
- Babies like active exploration and hands-on experiences.
- Babies can learn through daily activities and routines.
- Do not bombard your baby with stimulation; let your baby initiate or try things, and watch for cues that he or she needs a break or has had enough.
- Provide opportunities for new and expanded learning experiences for your baby through play with toys and objects and through social interactions.