

Learning, Play and Your Baby

Play is how infants learn to move, communicate, socialize and understand their surroundings.

Even at this young age, babies are ready to learn about the world around them. One of the first things they will learn is to associate the feel of your touch, the sound of your voice and the sight of your face with getting their needs for comfort and food met. You can encourage this by stimulating their senses in positive ways — with smiles, soothing sounds and gentle caresses.

It's important to recognize when your baby is alert and ready to learn and play and when he would rather be left alone. A baby who is awake but active (squirming, flapping arms or kicking legs) or fussing will be less able to focus on you. If he seems agitated or starts to cry when you try to get his attention, he may be getting overstimulated.

Toys

In the first few weeks you may want to introduce some simple, age-appropriate toys that appeal to the senses of sight, hearing and touch, such as:

- rattles
- textured toys
- musical toys
- unbreakable crib mirrors

Try toys with contrasting colors and patterns. Strong contrasts (such as red, white and black), curves and symmetry stimulate an infant's developing vision. As vision improves and babies gain more control over their movements, they'll interact more and more with their environment.

Sensory activity

Here are some other ideas for encouraging your newborn to learn and play:

- Put on soothing music and hold your baby, gently swaying to the tune.
- Pick a soothing song or lullaby and softly sing it often to him. The familiarity of the sound and words will have a soothing effect, particularly during fussy times.
- Smile, stick out your tongue and make other expressions for your infant to study, learn and imitate.
- Use a favorite toy for him to focus on and follow, or shake a rattle for him to find.
- Let your baby spend some awake time on his tummy to help strengthen the neck and shoulders. Always supervise your infant during "tummy time" and be ready to help if he gets tired or frustrated in this position. Never put an infant to sleep on his stomach — babies should sleep on their backs to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Talk to your baby and let him respond.

Keep in mind that babies develop at different rates. In the first few months of life, newborns depend on others to initiate interaction. But by the end of the third month your baby will engage you with facial expressions, vocalizations and gestures.

Babies will also start to explore their surroundings with their hands, reaching out, swatting at and grasping for a favorite toy. They'll also begin to notice their hands and feet, which will become a source of amusement. They enjoy staring at their hands, playing with their fingers and bringing their hands or a toy to their mouth.

There's a wide range of what's considered normal development. If you're concerned about your baby's vision or hearing, or he doesn't seem to be developing well in other ways, talk with your doctor.