



Learning and Playing with your Baby

Play is the primary way that infants learn how to move, communicate, socialize, and understand their surroundings. During the first month of life, your baby will learn by interacting with you.

What Is My Infant Learning?

One of the first things your baby will learn is to associate the feel of your touch, the sound of your voice, and the sight of your face with getting his or her needs for comfort and food met. You can encourage your newborn to learn by stimulating your newborn's senses in positive ways — with smiles, soothing sounds, and gentle caresses.

Even at this young age, newborns are ready to learn about the world around them. A newborn loves to look at faces, especially mom's. Likewise, in the first days and weeks of life, newborns can recognize their mother's voice. Your infant will respond to your voice (or other interesting sounds) by looking alert and becoming less active. The baby may try to find out where the sound is coming from by looking around and turning his or her head.

When you smile and talk to your infant, your face and the sound of your voice will become a familiar source of calm and comfort, and your little one will learn to associate you with getting nourishment, warmth, and soothing touch.

The "Rooting Reflex"

Babies are born with reflexes or programmed responses to certain stimuli, such as touch. These reflexes help ensure survival, but they also provide an opportunity for a baby to interact with the world. For example, the rooting reflex is elicited by gently

stroking a newborn's cheek. The infant's response is to turn head and mouth to that side, ready to eat. By the time they're 3 weeks old, babies will turn toward the breast or bottle not just out of a reflex, but because they've learned that it's a source of food.

Ready to Learn

During the first month of life, your newborn will spend much of the day sleeping or seeming drowsy. Over the next several weeks to months, your baby will mature and be awake or alert for longer periods of time. It's important to recognize when your baby is alert and ready to learn and play and when the baby would rather be left alone. A baby who is quiet and alert will be attentive and responsive and interested in surroundings.

A baby who is awake but active (squirming, flapping arms, or kicking legs) or fussing will be less able to focus on you. The baby may seem agitated or start to cry when you try to get his or her attention. These are signs that your baby may be getting overstimulated.

Over the coming weeks and months, you'll learn to recognize when your infant is ready to learn or overstimulated.

Encouraging Your Newborn to Learn

As you care for your newborn, he or she is learning to recognize your touch, the sound of your voice, and the sight of your face.

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 and mobiles 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.

Some Other Ideas

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 your baby. 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 the infant to focus on and follow, or

shake a rattle for your infant to find.

- Let your baby spend some awake time on his or her tummy to help strengthen the neck and shoulders. Always supervise your infant during "tummy time" and be ready to help if he or she gets tired or frustrated in this position. Never put an infant to sleep on his or her stomach — babies should sleep on their backs to reduce the risk of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).
- Talk to your baby.

Keep in mind that babies develop at different rates, and there is a wide range of normal development. If you have any concerns about your newborn's ability to see or hear, or your baby doesn't seem to be developing well in other ways, talk with your doctor.

As your baby grows

By 4 months old, your baby has learned to recognize you and familiar caregivers, focus and pay attention to things, and actively engage your attention.

Your infant will learn to sit during this time, and in the next few months will begin exploring by reaching out for objects, grasping and inspecting them.

Exploring will be a big part of this stage. Your child will be drawn to colors, patterns, and shapes of different objects and toys. By reaching out for things, babies learn about touch, shape, and texture.

Your baby's ability to reach and hold an object will mature now, and after successfully grasping an object, your tot is likely to put it into his or her mouth for further exploration. It's important to make sure that any objects that could be choking hazards — or dangerous to your baby in other ways — are out of reach, or even better, out of sight!

Although those first words are still a couple of months away, your infant is learning a lot about language and will begin to distinguish between different sounds even though he or she doesn't understand what the words mean. By the end of this period babies recognize and respond to their own name. Talk to your infant and respond to the sounds he or she is making — this helps teach the social aspects of language and conversation.

Learning Object Permanence

Your baby will also begin to get a sense of object permanence, that something can exist, even when it's out of sight. This knowledge will prompt your baby to search for an object that you have partially hidden and to drop toys and other objects over the side of a crib or high chair to watch you retrieve them.

By doing this, babies learn that an object exists even after it's dropped out of sight and start understanding cause and effect (that an action causes a reaction).

Encouraging Learning

Create a safe place for exploration (with supervision), because by the end of 7 months your baby will be rolling over, sitting, and reaching for everything. It's never too soon to childproof the play space, even if your baby isn't mobile yet — it will happen before you know it.

Make play spaces inviting and fun with age-appropriate toys in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and textures. Everyday objects, like wooden spoons, plastic containers, and cups also stimulate creativity and curiosity. It's not so much the toy that's important, but the way it can help your baby learn.

As your baby babbles and explores how to use his or her voice, keep responding. Reinforce the sounds by repeating them and introduce new sounds and simple words, then watch as your baby tries to imitate you.

Taken in part from:

Dowshen, Steven. "Learning, Play, and Your Newborn." Learning and Play. August 2008. Kids Health. 23 June 2009 <<http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/learning/learnnewborn.html#>>.

Downshend, Steven. "Learning, Play, and Your 4- to 7-Month-Old." Learning and Play. August 2008. Kids Health. 23 June 2009 <<http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/learning/learn47m.html>>.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- **Ready to Learn**—Nov 17th at The Utah County Health Dept., Rm. 1601 from 12-1 p.m. Bring your children and learn about the fun ways you can make reading, math, and science enjoyable for your young ones. Receive a complimentary book, & remember to RSVP at 422-1807.
- **Car Seat Safety Class**—Nov 3rd, 2009, 10 a.m., Utah County Health Dept., Rm. #2601.
- **Explore the Born Learning Trail**- there are seven throughout Utah County . For location of Born Learning Trails see www.unitedwayuc.org/welcomebaby
- **Provo City Library**—
 - ☞ “Book Babies” every Friday from 10-10:30 a.m. for infants 0-12 mos.
 - ☞ “Mother Goose Time” every Friday from 11-12pm for 1 year olds. Age appropriate songs, stories, and activities for baby and their parents/ caregivers.
- **Orem City Library**—
 - ☞ “Laptime” every Tues, Wed, & Thur at 10am in Hogwarts’ Corner. A 20 min. program for babies, toddlers & their caregivers with songs, finger-plays & short stories to introduce our youngest patrons to the world of words.
 - ☞ “Storytime” every Tues, Wed, & Thurs at 10:30am in the Storytelling Wing. A 30 min. program for preschoolers & young school age children with stories, puppets & activities to engage youngsters & highlight the joys of books & storytelling.