

Play for the Brain

“The first years last forever,” experts advise parents. Modern imaging techniques show how early experiences have long-term consequences by helping to determine the actual *structure* of a child’s brain. It’s as if what happens in early childhood is written on stone, as compared to later experiences, which might be likened to tracings in the sand, or even writing on water, as we get older.

While you, as a parent, might welcome expert confirmation that the enriched environment you provide will have a lasting influence on your child’s future, you might also be feeling a bit intimidated by the heavy responsibility. The following simple guidelines will help reassure you that you are up to the job...and you don’t need a degree in child psychology or a toy store in your basement!

Learn about child development

When you have a general picture of what children can do at different ages, you can avoid feeling unnecessarily disappointed or frustrated. It’s unrealistic to expect that your one-month-old infant should be able to shake her fancy rattle or that your ten month old should be interested in making a tower of blocks.

Knowing what to expect will also help you provide appropriate games, toys and activities at the right time. If you read that at eleven months most babies can pinch things between their thumb and forefinger, you will put some Cheerios or frozen peas on a tray so they can try out this new skill. If you know that language learning starts at or even before birth, you will talk, sing and read stories to your baby long before he or she can use words him or herself.

Look for information about typical stages in free pamphlets at public health clinics or family resource programs. Parenting magazines also often present easy-to-read articles on the subject. For more details, ask your librarian for books or web sites on child development.

Follow your child’s lead

Books and articles will tell you what is within the range of “normal” behaviour, but each child is unique. What interests your particular child? The books may say that massage is good for infants, but if your son squirms and turns away after five

minutes, he’s saying he’s had enough. If your toddler is more involved in knocking down towers than in building them up, leave your demonstration of elaborate castle construction for another day. If your child becomes fascinated by dinosaurs, look at the library for books or videos on the subject.

When you follow the child’s lead, you increase learning potential, and at the same time, you strengthen the attachment between you. Your attentiveness says, “What interests you is important to me. I care about you and I want to get to know you better.”

Keep it simple

Just because brain researchers use high tech equipment doesn’t mean you need high tech toys to stimulate brain development. Computer games develop hand-eye coordination...and so does stringing pasta on a shoe lace. Experiencing the real world through *all* the senses creates the brain connections that will make learning at school come more easily later.

Similarly, development of the emotional and social parts of the brain depends on relationships with real people. A video may entertain a child, but when a caring adult tells or reads a story, cuddled up with a child at bedtime, they are laying the basis for future “emotional intelligence”. An infant’s best toy is still a caring adult’s face.

Relax

If you find yourself rushing from playgroup to music lesson to gymnastics club and your child never has time to just play, you may be overdoing the enrichment. When stimulation becomes stressful, it *interferes* with learning, so leave time to relax.

Have fun

Encouraging brain development doesn’t mean sitting your three year old at a desk to trace over endless lines of printed letters...unless he or she is having fun playing school. Play remains at the heart of early learning. Children are naturally motivated to learn by exploring and manipulating their world. Caring adults help them to follow their interests by providing a safe setting and a responsive, stimulating environment. It can be as simple as having fun together.

by Betsy Mann