

YOUR BABY'S PATH TO

Learning!





Your baby's brain will develop faster in the first five years than at any other time in his life. At birth, his brain is only a quarter of its adult size. In the first year, your baby's brain will double. And by kindergarten, his brain will be 90% of its adult size.

This is an exciting period of growth for your baby and there is no one better than you to help him grow and learn.

This booklet outlines some ways to put your baby on the path to **kindergarten readiness and long-term success.**





Pregnancy and Nutrition

Your baby's brain starts taking shape by the third week of pregnancy. That is why what you eat and drink during pregnancy is so important to her brain development. It can be hard to think about eating healthy, especially if you are feeling sick, but even small steps can help your baby.

POP YOUR PRENATAL VITAMIN DAILY

Vitamins are like an insurance policy to make sure you get the right balance of nutrients your baby needs. They also have folic acid which is vital for baby's brain development and prevents birth defects. If the vitamins upset your stomach, try taking them with meals, or talk to your doctor about switching brands.





EAT FOR BABY

- Munch on fruits and veggies. Think about adding one serving at meals and with your snacks.
- Drink water. Try for 6-8 glasses a day. Staying hydrated has the added benefit of helping with morning sickness.
- It can be hard to give up your favorite drinks. Start small. Substitute water for pop when you can. And limit caffeinated drinks, like coffee, to one or two a day.
- Your baby needs lots of calcium (1,000 mg) and protein (71 grams) daily to build strong bones and grow. Dairy and almond milk are great for calcium. Lean meats (like chicken) and fish are great sources of protein, as is cottage cheese.
- Read labels. Try to limit high sugar foods.
- As much as possible, eat foods that are natural, not processed in packages.

AVOID ALCOHOL AND SMOKING

Drugs, alcohol, and smoking (including vaping) can have serious side effects for your baby. But sometimes, no matter how much you want to, it can be hard to quit. We can help you find help. It's never too late to quit bad habits and help your baby have a healthier start.

POST PARTUM...AND AS BABY GROWS

Right after birth, you may find it hard to regulate your body because of the shift in hormones. Good nutrition can help you feel better. And as your baby starts table food, think of carrots, cucumbers, broccoli and berries as sides at meals and snacks. Add some ranch dressing or dip to make vegetables more appealing. Encourage her to drink lots of water...add fruit slices or berries to make it fun. Be careful about fruit juices. Some are not 100% juice. Even 100% juice is less healthy than eating the real thing. Finally, model good eating. If you don't eat your veggies, your child won't either.

HEALTHIER FAST-FOOD CHOICES

- Grilled instead of breaded or fried
- Fruit or salad instead of french fries
- Water or unsweetened iced tea instead of pop
- Chili or bowls instead of sandwiches



Newborn Care

You've waited for months. You finally get to meet your new baby. You will probably experience a broad range of emotions... everything from relief to concern to anxiety to pure joy. Your feelings may change suddenly and unpredictably. You have been through a lot physically and, if this is your first baby, it will take some time to become proficient at diapering, feeding and taking care of your child's needs. **Be patient with yourself.**

BABIES CRY!

Expect your baby to cry. That's really the only way your new baby can communicate with you. Crying tells you something is wrong — an empty belly, a wet bottom, being tired, or needing to be held and cuddled. If your baby isn't hungry or wet, oftentimes your baby is overstimulated or tired. Put your baby in a safe environment to fall asleep in their crib or wrap your baby in a carrier. If your baby cries excessively, talk to your pediatrician about possible dairy intolerance, the #1 allergen for infants.

BABY'S WAKE WINDOW

Your baby can only stay awake for a short time. If she stays awake too long, you will have an overtired baby who struggles to calm down. If her wake window is too short, she won't be ready to fall asleep or will only take a tiny catnap.



Wake Windows by Age

BABY'S AGE	WAKE WINDOW
0-4 weeks	• 35-60 minutes
4-12 weeks	• 60-90 minutes
3-4 months	• 75-120 minutes
5-7 months	• 2-3 hours
7-10 months	• 2.5-3.5 hours
11-14 months	• 3-4 hours
14-24 months	• 4-6 hours

BABY LEARNING

Your baby will quickly learn to recognize you as the person who comforts and feeds her most. As a newborn, her vision will still be blurry, and she will need to see something (like your face) up close, about 8–10 inches away. Think of daily routines (like feeding, bathing, and diapering) as learning moments. Get up close and look directly at your baby. Talk to her or sing a song.

BABY TALK

Speak to your baby at every opportunity. This is one of the most important ways babies learn. Use “baby talk.” Normal language, but make it simple. Repeat words, say it slower and add in smiles and exaggerated facial expressions to get your baby's attention and let her know you are talking “special” to her.

PLAY WITH YOUR BABY

Help your baby develop:

- Give her rattles and crinkly toys.
- Put toys in your baby's hands.
- Have tummy time every day.
- Play peek-a-boo.
- Sing songs.
- Have your baby look at you and follow your face as you move.





Raising Readers

More than any other piece of advice, kindergarten teachers say reading with your baby is the best way to prepare them for school.

It's never too early to start, even at 3-4 months. It can be overwhelming to think of reading when you're feeding your baby around the clock and sleep-deprived. Start small. **Small steps add up to big benefits for your baby.**

CREATE A ROUTINE

Just before supper, right after bath, at bedtime...pick a time to read that works with your family schedule. One book or 5 minutes a day is a great goal. Don't worry about finishing entire books — focus on pages that you and your baby enjoy. Set a manageable goal like one book a day...*it will add up to 365 books a year and over 1,800 books by kindergarten!*

THE WORD GAP

Some parents assume babies don't learn language until they can talk. But that is not the case. Studies show that by age 3, children from families who read know far more words than those who don't. **Hearing more words puts your baby way ahead in terms of language development and future reading skills.**

The Million Word Gap

New research shows the different number of words that children will have heard by age 5, based on how often parents read to them:

Never read to: **4,662** words

1-2 times per week: **63,570** words

3-5 times per week: **169,520** words

Daily: **296,660** words

Five books a day: **1,483,300** words

CREATING A BOND

The benefits of reading together go beyond learning to read. Cozy time spent reading gives you a chance to slow down, connect with your baby and build a strong relationship.

BUILDING EMPATHY

Research shows that listening to a story gives your child the ability to "walk in someone else's shoes." We all want our children to grow up to be kind, but sometimes just saying "be nice" or "think about how she feels" doesn't really sink in. Hearing an actual story about another can give your baby a better appreciation for the feelings of others and cultural differences.

DEVELOPING IMAGINATION

Reading can be tough work when your child is first learning. It takes a lot of mental energy to understand how written words and sentences fit together. By reading to your toddler, she can use her imagination more and dive deeper into the story.





The Importance of Play

It's no secret babies love to play, but there's much more to it than having fun. Play is your baby's "work" and way of learning about the world. Through play, your baby tries out new skills, explores his imagination and creativity, and learns about relationships with other people.

THE POWER OF 10 MINUTES

We spend a lot of time with our kids, but often those times are hectic, or we are multi-tasking. Time spent together in front of TV is not the same as playing together or reading a book. Commit to 10 minutes of undistracted, look-you-in-the-eye time with your child every day ...when nothing else in the world matters.

Things to say:

"What do you want to do?"

"What do you want to talk about?"

"P.S. I love you."

FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Play is all about the process, not the outcome. Creativity is maximized when your child is free to choose what to do. When he plays, it's okay if it's not the "right" way. Purple cats, toy cups as birthday hats, matchbox car pileups. One way to follow his lead is to offer choices. *Would you like to play outside or with playdough on the table? Would you like to paint a picture or use crayons?*



ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT PLAY

Playing with adults and other children is important, but there is also a need for independent play to foster imagination and creativity. Encourage your toddler to play alone. You can start with 5 or 10 minutes. Set a timer and tell him when it goes off, he can come and find you. Slowly add more time to each play session.

SCREEN TIME IS NOT PLAY TIME

Real-world interactions are important for your baby's brain development. Excessive screen time detracts from activities that boost his brain power like play and interacting with people. **Babies up to 18 months don't need any screen time.** Preschoolers should have no more than 1 hour a day.

IT'S OK TO BE BORED!

Children do not need to be stimulated 24/7. Studies show boredom actually promotes more creativity and "out of the box" thinking. You can offer suggestions or include your child in what you are doing. Making supper? Invite him to help. Working outside? Ask him to keep you company.



Playtime Activities

Play hide-and-seek

Give a piggyback ride throughout the house

Spell words with alphabet magnets on the fridge

"On your mark — Get set — Go" races

Use pots and pans as drums

Play "I Spy"

Make a fort with sheets and pillows

Practice bouncing, throwing and catching a ball

Play with water in the sink

Practice pouring water from cup to cup

Use pudding as edible finger paint

Take turns making silly faces

Stack tupperware containers to make a tower

Play in the rain

Blow bubbles

Make a spaceship with a cardboard box

The Power of Routines

The world can be a big and scary place for your little one. Having a routine helps make her world feel safe and predictable. A routine strengthens brain connections and builds confidence, because she knows what's coming.

START EARLY

At around 2-4 months, you will start to see patterns in your baby's day. Begin with a consistent bedtime routine, and plan to do roughly the same things at the same time every day. Bedtime routine basics can include bath, diaper, pajamas, feeding, sleep sack/swaddle, goodnight book and bed. If your baby knows that every night you will read a book together after having a bath, it will calm her sense of the unknown.

REDUCING NO'S

Routines limit the number of "no's" and behavior corrections, since your child will be better able to predict what should happen next. When something is viewed as a standard expectation, your child will often cooperate automatically, without a fight or a tantrum. In the long run, routines help encourage better relationships, because we aren't always struggling with our kids.

BUILDING INDEPENDENCE

As your baby grows, it's natural for her to assert her independence and want to have a say. This works best in the context of regular routines. It gives a young child confidence and sense of control, when parents say: *"It's bedtime. Would you like to brush your teeth now or after we get your pajamas on?"* or *"I know you want a cracker, but it is clean-up time now. Remember after clean-up, it is snack time."*





Building Confidence

Self-confidence is essential for kindergarten readiness.

If your child is confident, she will be more willing to take on new challenges and interact better with other children.

GIVE ATTENTION

You are the most important person in your child's life and your approval means so much. Giving your child your full attention will improve her self-esteem. Look directly at your child when she is talking with you (not at your phone or the TV).

GIVE POSITIVITY

Look for ways to provide positive feedback. **Give specifics.** When your child comes to you with a picture she colored, go beyond "Great job." Try to notice what she did well. "I like how you made the dog blue. That's so creative!" or "Look how colorful you made this picture. I bet you worked really hard on it."

IT'S OK TO FAIL

Failing is inevitable. If your child gets the message that it's OK to fail, he will also learn that it's OK to try, and will be able to enjoy new activities because the stakes won't be as high.

Your child will learn to solve problems and understand natural consequences. It's important to resist the temptation to do everything for your child. Give him space to learn to do things independently.



WHEN MELTDOWNS HAPPEN

Young children are not able to regulate their emotions. They will get frustrated, and they will misbehave. The language we use when these inevitable meltdowns occur is powerful. It is important to stay calm and keep our own emotions under control. These are the times to build your child up, not tear him down.

THE WAVE

When tantrums inevitably happen, think of a wave.

- If you see the wave coming, try to catch the emotion before it explodes. *"Oh, I see in your face that you are frustrated. What's going on?"*
- When the wave is at its tallest point, it's not time to talk. This is the moment to teach your child to settle himself. *"You are upset. We need to stop so we can calm down."*
- After the wave settles, that's the time to review. *"That was a hard moment, huh? What just happened?"*

After the wave is the time to talk. Emotions are still fresh, but more under control. You can help your child unpack what just happened and identify key feelings.



You and your baby are lucky to have each other.

No one loves your baby more or knows them better. But babies don't come with an instruction manual.

Women's Care Center classes and one-on-one sessions can help you put your baby on the path to learning.

- *Parenting and family classes*
- *Nutrition classes*
- *Prenatal classes*
- *Newborn care classes*
- *CARE Program: Four one-on-one visits with a counselor during each trimester and postpartum*
- *"Mommy and Me" activities*
- *"Raising Kids with Character" education*
- *"Strong Fathers" education*

Your counselor would love to work with you to create an individualized plan that works for YOU ...and your baby!