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Boosting Your Baby's Brain

Babies grow at an amazing rate. All areas of growth including cognitive, language, small and large motor, emotional and social development dramatically increase with the amount of experiences we provide for our children. The same is true for a child's brain. An infant's brain begins forming three weeks after conception, and by age three is twice as active as a normal adult's brain. The latest research on brain development proves that the importance of the parent or caregiver's role in the first year of a child's life is greater than ever recognized before. In fact, one of the most important responsibilities of the caregiver or parent is to provide many opportunities for play activities to boost brain development and attachment.

Activities

The following are a few key ideas for a parent or caregiver to boost a baby's brain activity and growth at each developmental stage:

Zero to three months:

- Talk, sing, hold and rock your baby often.
- Meet your baby's needs by paying attention to his cues.
- Hold toys for him to look at that are brightly colored or black and white.

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Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program staff at MSU Extension can answer questions or help you learn more about money management, parent, food, nutrition and health issues. MSU Extension educators integrate university and community resources to provide tools that help families succeed. For more information on FCS programs in Michigan, call your county MSU Extension office. Check the government pages of your phone book for contact information.

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- Appropriate toys for this age include rattles, large balls, soft cloths (socks, soft books or washcloths) and mirrors to look at.

Four to six months:

- Hold your baby on your lap and read or sing songs.
- Help your baby stand.
- Make silly faces, and play games like peek-a-boo.
- Give your baby toys to explore (touch, put in his mouth, throw, etc.).
- Appropriate toys for this age include cause and effect toys (jack in the boxes, push/ pull toys), large plastic keys, spoons and measuring cups.

Seven to ten months:

- Make certain spaces in your home inviting for your baby to explore and crawl around.
- Help your child fill empty containers with small objects (larger than one and one half inches).
- Help your child go from standing to sitting and give her magazines and books to explore.
- Appropriate toys for this age include large puzzles, nesting toys, blocks, large beads and toys that can be taken apart and reconnected.

Eleven to fourteen months:

- Play labeling games with books and objects to strengthen vocabulary.
- Help your child begin to pretend play by playing with dolls, kitchen sets and pretending to complete household chores such as cleaning and cooking.
- Let your child explore large crayons. Scribble and make simple pictures with your child.
- Appropriate toys for this age include stacking rings, boxes and containers, push and pull toys, building blocks and pretend play items.

The key activities provided are only a basis for initiating play with infants. We often overlook every day activities such as feeding, bathing and changing times as opportunities for play and

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attachment. Those times provide great occasions to sing, talk to, hold, touch and play as well. Playing, holding, and responding to an infant's cues establish an irreplaceable trust and attachment between the parent and child. By creating a safe and nurturing environment, the infant is likely to be easily engaged, act more confident and adventurous, which will lead to added learning experiences.

Look for activities and keys to boosting your toddler and preschooler's brain development in future editions. For more information on these and other parenting, money management, food, nutrition, or health issues, contact the MSU Extension Office. MSU Extension Family and Consumer Science educators are located in all 83 Michigan counties to integrate university and community resources to help families succeed.

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Sources:

Brain Games for Babies. Jackie Silberg. Maryland: The Gryphon House, Inc. 1999

Right From Birth: Building Your Child's Foundation For Life. Craig T. Ramey and Sharon L. Ramey. New York: The Goddard Press, 1999.

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