

## Magic of Everyday Moments: Brain Wonders

In the 1900's, a parenting manual recommended never hug and kiss children, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when you say goodnight. Boy, how things have changed.

A robust body of research has confirmed what parents have always known by instinct: that it is precisely these everyday moments showing affection, comforting, and playing with young children that builds strong, healthy brains.

The first three years of a child's life are uniquely important because this is the most sensitive period for brain development. The experiences a child has during this time will shape the architecture of her brain and build the connections that allow her to develop important lifelong skills like problem solving, communication, self-control, and relationship building.

New brain connections are forming at a rate of 700 every second in response to the baby's experiences out in the world. These connections help the baby learn the essentials to survive and thrive within her family, community, and culture. It's the quality of a baby's relationships that has a major influence on which brain connections take place and the strength of these connections.

What does this mean? Early experiences matter. Supportive relationships in the early years plant the seeds for love, safety, and security, which forge a set of connections that help children learn and bond with others.

The brains of children who experience ongoing maltreatment are wired to sense danger and to respond to threat. This increases children's anxiety, fear, and feelings of insecurity, which interferes with learning.

A baby's brain connections reflect the quality of the care she receives. These differences have impacts that can last a lifetime because our brain connections affect the way we think, the way we learn, and the way we manage our feelings and build relationships with others all the way into adulthood.

So what does your baby need to build healthy brain connections? She needs you to tune into her signals, her words, facial expressions, and actions, and respond in ways that respect her individual needs. We call this responsive care. When you respond in this sensitive way, you are letting your child know you understand what she's telling you, and that you respect her needs. These loving, back and forth interactions, build strong, positive brain connections that help your child thrive over time.

How else can you nurture healthy brain connections? By seeing your child as a partner in your interactions. Like a game of catch, it's all about back and forth. One of you starts

the interaction, the other responds. You talk to your baby, then give him time to respond with sounds, words, or actions. Then you answer back. It's a dialogue.

There's another perhaps surprising experience that also nurtures healthy brain development: dealing with some stress. That's right. A little bit of stress goes a long way toward building a strong, healthy brain. Helpful stress is brought on by the everyday challenges we face, like muscling through a difficult task or experience. These challenges help us learn new skills and how to solve problems, such as figuring out a puzzle or managing difficult feelings, like not getting everything we want. Working through this kind of stress is what allows us to get along with others and ultimately succeed in work, school, and life. Your child is able to tolerate stress because you are there to support him. And he has learned he can depend on you.

Watch your child carefully to see what he is capable of and when he really needs your help. Giving your child a chance to struggle a little helps him learn how to solve problems on his own. See yourself as a coach, offering ideas and suggestions, but don't take over. Step in only when it's necessary. Remember that it's mastering new challenges that builds brain power and the motivation to learn.

So what matters the most? You. You are the most important person in your child's life. You know him best. You love her most. So, remember, you are not just singing lullabies, stacking blocks, changing diapers, playing peekaboo, or sharing stories.

You are helping your baby build a healthy brain.