

# Baby's development

DIFFERENT WAYS TO HELP YOUR BABY GET A GREAT START IN LIFE

by Lois Wattis

A father gazes at his newborn daughter's face and she responds – her eyes transfixed on his face – and he laughs as her intense attention makes her look slightly cross-eyed. A few short weeks later the same scenario results in twinkling eyes, mouth curling and opening – his baby smiles!

The chemistry of face to face interaction is an automatic and instinctive response for the baby and for the adult involved. When we smile at a baby our pupils dilate – a sign that the sympathetic nervous system is pleasurably aroused. When baby sees the smiling face and dilated pupils his sympathetic nervous system is also automatically aroused. His pupils also dilate and his heart beats faster. The adult recognises baby's positive response and engages more with the baby. Two natural



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else within view and reach, which is a vital part of growing and learning. As your baby discovers how things around her look, feel, smell and sound she is developing her senses. Everything is new so there is no need to swamp baby with toys that do all sorts of tricks.

Parenting in our modern world has become much more complicated than it was for previous generations with the introduction of screen based entertainment for all ages – including babies! How much these may affect or even confound normal developmental processes is unknown, however psychologists and educators have expressed concerns about problems associated with excessive TV exposure for decades. The plethora of electronic screen-based games and gadgets available for young children presents a new dilemma for parents. Babies, toddlers and children love them, and parents may worry their child will be left behind, developmentally, if they don't learn 'screen skills' early in life. However, scientists now warn of potential risks associated with exposing unborn and young babies to electromagnetic fields (EMF) and radiofrequency (RF) emissions from wireless technologies – including room monitors and mobile phones. Be reassured, parents, your baby's

healthy growth and development is not dependent on your iPad, it is dependent on you.

Babies learn by watching and interacting with people and their surroundings. Physical development begins with control of his head. Indeed, a newborn baby demonstrates a surprisingly strong ability to lift his head when positioned on his mother's chest, and will purposefully wriggle and bob towards the breast to latch and feed. Newborns can deliberately turn their head from side to side for comfort and to seek Mother's face and respond to her voice.

Baby's head is easily moulded for many months and will become flattened at the back if baby does not have some time in other positions when awake. Head and shoulder control are enhanced by 'tummy time' when baby is awake and a newborn usually enjoys being laid prone on Mum or Dad's chest. Young babies may only tolerate small periods of tummy time on the floor – a few minutes at a time, before tiring. Placing a rolled-up towel or bunny rug across baby's chest and under his arms can make tummy time more comfortable for a young baby. Wakeful tummy time on a comfortable rug on the floor or on the change table after a nappy change provides another perspective of the world for baby. Placement of a toy within reach will encourage baby to balance, stretch and try to grasp it.

Lying on the floor with baby expands tummy time to another level of enjoyment for baby and



"feel good" chemicals called neuropeptide and dopamine are released from the brains of both the adult and the baby. These chemicals stimulate brain development and new tissue growth as well as creating a sense of wellbeing and pleasure, so adults and babies are more likely to respond positively to future interactions. Maybe this is why strangers can't help looking into prams to talk to babies even if they don't know the parents!

A newborn baby naturally seeks eye contact and responds to sounds, especially familiar voices. A nurtured baby thrives physically and mentally as he interacts with his parents and his environment, enhancing brain development and learning. Signs of baby's growth provide both reassurance and delight for parents as the weeks and months fly by. Parents are absorbed by their baby and naturally recognise, encourage and celebrate every milestone of their baby's development. During play times parents should be watchful for signs that baby has had enough by turning her head away, averting her gaze. Baby can quickly become overwhelmed, so back-off, as overstimulation will lead to an unhappy ending to your interactions.

Your baby's developmental progress will involve her VISION – the ability to see near and far and understand what she is seeing, her HEARING – the

ability to listen and understand what she is hearing, which will influence her SPEECH development. These senses will influence her ability to interact socially and play with other adults and children. Progression of PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT involves large body movements as she gains control of large muscles, allowing her to sit up unassisted, to crawl and eventually walk and run. The small body movements, called MANIPULATION, develop as control of small muscles become coordinated, demonstrated by skills such as holding a toy and picking up small items successfully.

Babies gain new skills in a predictable order but the age that milestones are achieved is quite variable because all babies are individuals. Parents are keen to provide their baby with a great start in life and want to provide a learning environment that encourages healthy development. Babies are naturally interested in their surroundings, and explore their bodies and everything



feature

## The owner's manual for new babies has been written - at last!



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adult alike. Singing to baby, making funny faces, or squeaking a toy or rattle provides entertainment, stimulation, and communication opportunities. Varying baby's floor time activities is easy with playmats or "feelie rugs" made of a variety of fabrics with different textures which provide sensory experiences for baby. Tummy time will enhance the strengthening of baby's neck, shoulders and torso. Baby will discover how to push himself up, to balance and to roll over during tummy time – essential physical skills as baby progresses towards crawling.

Sensory development is enhanced by singing and reading to baby. Making animal sounds and associating them with pictures or toys, and songs and rhymes with hand actions are age-old activities which have stood the test of time. Babies

love to mimic sounds and expressions, so blowing raspberries, pretend sneezes after baby sneezes and touch and tickle games from nose to toes are fun ways for baby to understand his own body. Peek-a-boo games are the beginning of baby's comprehension about when something is visible, and not visible – but still there. Baby's fun-time list is only limited by your imagination!

Lois Wattis is an experienced Midwife and Lactation Consultant and the author of "New Baby 101 – A Midwife's Guide for New Parents" App and eBook. This reliable resource includes five videos to enhance the development of parents' skills and confidence.  
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