



Five to Thrive



The brain is not like any other part of the body. Nearly all the cells of the brain are in place when we are born – about a hundred billion of them. But they are not yet working. The brain grows when connections are made between the cells in response to what is happening to us. These connections are forming all the time all through our lives. What happens to us shapes our brains.

### **The brain is amazing...**

In the first three years of life the brain is growing and changing faster than it ever will again. At times during the first year of life a million connections are forming every single second in your baby's brain.

So what happens to your baby shapes their brain. And the most important thing that happens to your baby is you! Everything you do when you are with your baby sparks connections in their brain, turning connections into pathways that the child can use again.



### **Five to Thrive**

Your child's body grows better when you give your child good food. Your child's brain grows better when you do five simple things that feed the growing brain:

**Respond.Cuddle.Relax.Play.Talk**

These are your child's daily 'five to thrive' – the building blocks for a healthy brain. A healthy brain will help your child be happy in themselves, make friends and enjoy their family life, as well as being the best start for learning once they go to school. And every day will bring many opportunities to give your baby's brain what it needs to grow well.

## Respond

### My brain grows better when you respond to me...

I feel very scared if I get no response from you. When you look at me with love in your eyes I feel safe. Your voice helps me to feel safe. Being close to you helps me feel safe.

When you look at me I am interested in your face, and I look at you. This helps my eyes to work together. My brain builds connections for looking at other people and understanding them.

When you copy the expression on my face, this helps me understand what I am feeling. Then I copy you, and this builds connections in my brain for understanding and managing my feelings.

## Remember

When your baby has your full attention, their whole brain is working. When you are watching TV, texting or talking on the phone, they don't get the benefit.

As children get older they begin to sort out their own problems as well as asking you for help. So sometimes 'wait and see' is a good response for older children.



## Cuddle

### My brain grows better when you cuddle me...

Feeling safe with you fills my body with special chemicals that help my brain to grow. The patterns that grow in my brain when you cuddle me will mean that all my life I will be able to feel safe with safe people.

When I am close to you my body begins to work in tune with yours. When you feel excited or stressed your heart beats faster and so does mine. When you feel calm or happy your heart beats slower, and so does mine. Connections are building in my brain that will make it possible for me to control my body one day.

Remember that my brain works more slowly than yours, so I need time to notice what is happening and respond to it.

## Some suggestions

Cuddle your baby as often as you like – babies can't have too much contact.

Respect the space of infants as they grow older. There may be times when they don't want a cuddle but you should try to find other ways to provide reassuring contact.

Use different kinds of touching. Massage and stroking, tickling, hair brushing and finger games (like 'round and round the garden') are all good for your baby's brain.

Use gentle circular rubbing of the stomach to help a baby with wind or constipation.

## Remember

Babies need touch that soothes (cuddles) and touch that stimulates (tickles).

Some very young babies (especially if they are small at birth) may sleep too much – gentle stroking or finger-play can encourage them to wake and feed.

As well as cuddling, it is good to put your baby down to experience some quiet time – this is the start of learning to be independent.

## Relax

### My brain grows better when you relax with me...

When I feel stressed I need you to help me. My body works in tune with yours. When I am stressed I need you to calm down!

Just remember that my brain works more slowly than yours, so it may take some time for me to respond.

### Some suggestions

Sing or hum if you or your baby is getting stressed – this will help you relax and is very soothing for your baby. Singing is better than shouting!

Try to have some time when you are just focused on the warmth, sounds sights and smells of your baby, not on things you need to get done, or on people events that have made you upset or angry.

Find some of your own time to do the special things that help you relax – you have to look after yourself if you want to look after your baby.

Relax into being a parent – the experience can be unfamiliar, scary or leave you feeling guilty or stressed but all parents have had to learn the hard way.

## Remember

A close cuddle, rhythmic rocking and persistent Ssh-ing in a dark environment will sometimes 'reset' an over-stimulated baby brain.



## Play

### My brain grows better when you play with me...

I need you to soothe me when I'm upset, but I also need you to make life interesting for me. Toys are great, but the best toy in the world for me is...you!

When you pull faces at me I copy you, and connections in my brain make links between the expression on my face and communicating. That will help me to understand feelings.

When you play counting games, or singing games, or action games, my brain builds connections that help me to make sense of the world around me and to have fun.

And whenever I smile and you smile back at me I feel happy. Happiness fills my body with chemicals that help my brain to grow.

### Some suggestions

Follow your child's lead – if you join in their game, you are telling them that their ideas and decisions are important.

Try to ensure you spend some time outside every day. The outside world is full of interesting, exciting things for a baby, and being able to look across long distances is very important in helping their developing vision.

Get down on the floor for creative play – with models, dolls, blocks or just pieces of paper.

Encourage your growing child to play pretending games. Who will they be? Where will they go? What will they do there?

## Remember

Play works best when you are on the same level as your child – on the floor together, sitting together at a table, etc.

## Talk



### My brain grows better when you talk to me...

I love it when you talk, when you make nonsense noises, and when you sing. I get frightened if there is too much shouting or arguing.

I need you to tell me everything right from the start. I know nothing, so everything I learn in my life will be built on what you are teaching me now. Involve me in life by telling me about it.

I need you to listen to me as well. Remember that my brain works more slowly than yours so it will take me time to respond when you speak to me. When I make sounds to you, it really helps the connections in my brain if you look straight at me and copy the sounds back to me. Then I know you are listening to me, which makes me feel I matter. Help me to tell you how I feel, so that I learn to manage my feelings by talking about them.

### Some suggestions

Start by copying your baby's sounds and generating new ones (from 'Ma ma ma' to Ga ga ga'). The first talking doesn't have any words.

Use as many rhymes, poems or songs as you can – to you baby you are the world's greatest singing!

Read to your baby regularly, even when they are very young. Simple rhymes and rhythms will hold their attention.

Talk to your baby about what they are experiencing. 'Can you feel the soft toy?' 'Did you see the car?' 'You're enjoying your milk this morning.'

Provide a running commentary on your own life. Tell your baby about colours, count the steps you climb or the socks and towels as you do the washing.

Keep your 'sharp' voice for then you are warning a baby about something dangerous.

### Remember

Any words will help to build your baby's brain. Pop songs, a shopping list or the writing on the cereal packet are more meaningful than Shakespeare to young children.

## Useful resources

**Small Talk** – A free book (available online) which can help you learn to talk to your baby:

[www.hello.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-parents/smalltalk.aspx](http://www.hello.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-parents/smalltalk.aspx)

**Talk To Your Baby** – Public website with free leaflets on communicating with young children:

[www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk\\_to\\_your\\_baby](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby)

