



BUILDING HEALTHY FAMILIES

THE PARENT TOOLBOX

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Building Baby's Brain Right From the Start



The brain develops more significantly during pregnancy than any other stage of development after birth.

According to experts at Zero to Three (zerotothree.org), a leading voice for the mental health



and well-being of infants and toddlers, children develop “one million neural connections per second” between birth and three years old. What’s more, the most significant brain development occurs during pregnancy before a baby even leaves the womb.

Just like the brains of all young children, a baby’s brain in utero will develop best in an environment that is safe, responsive, and predictable.

A safe place for brain growth is free from toxins and stress. Protecting Mom from stress protects baby from potential harm caused by the hormone cortisol that is released when a pregnant mother is feeling

overwhelmed, anxious, or afraid. It is common for expectant parents to feel nervous, and hormonal changes can intensify emotional distress. Friends and family can provide social support that is safe and free from judgment. Strategies for mom to enhance her sense of well-being include participation in enjoyable activities and getting regular exercise and sleep.



Daily and continual stress can be addressed with a professional. A mother’s prenatal care team can recommend a therapist or online counselor or prescribe temporary medication when needed.

The care team will also share a list of foods and substances to avoid during pregnancy in order to



maintain a toxin-free growing zone for baby. Deli meats, certain seafoods, alcohol, tobacco, nicotine, marijuana, and illicit drugs all pose risk to an infant’s healthy brain development. If you are like most people, changing a habit or giving up something pleasurable is not easy. Support is available in many forms. To get started:

Order a Quit Kit from Mothers & Babies Perinatal Network:
1-800-231-0744 or 772-0517

Find Support for Addiction at: Friends of Recovery:
<https://for-ny.org/>

Check out the next page for ideas to build baby’s brain using *Responsive and Predictable Caregiving*.

Dad's Corner:

Babies can hear and respond to sound at 18 weeks along. Your little one will know your voice at birth!





Responsive Caregiving is good for Brain Development:

Getting in tune with a developing baby strengthens the parent-child bond:



- Talk to your baby: tell him what you are doing/thinking; leave time for a response
- Read to your little one: pick out a bedtime book for the future
- Enjoy music together: move gently to rhythm, share your talent on an instrument
- Laugh every day: if you can't get started, look up jokes or funny memes online
- Respond to baby's kicks and movements with gentle touches or massage
- Relax in a rocker: rock rhythmically, and share your hopes and dreams with baby
- Go outside: feel the wind, listen to birds, smell flowers
- Play a tasting game in late pregnancy: try different dips or seasoning on vegies and wait for baby's activity
- When baby gets hiccups, offer gentle caresses to calm him
- Journal/record your time together before birth



Predictable Caregiving is good for Brain development

Maintaining routines and consistency teach baby how to trust and provide a sense of security:

- Head to bed at the same time every night: start setting baby's internal clock for sleep
- Eat small servings of healthy foods every few hours: this can relieve heartburn and discomfort for Mom and baby and make the adjustment to round-the clock feedings easier
- Be the "same" predictable Mom every day: seek social support to dispel intense anger, avoid yelling and exposing baby to loud arguments
- Incorporate daily walks or other safe exercises in your routine
- Honor bonding time everyday that will translate to mommy and me time after birth

