

respond



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“ 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 to feel safe. ”

some suggestions

- Try to guess what your baby's crying means and meet their basic needs
 - warmth and comfort, food, a clean nappy, sleep.
- Pass your baby objects they are interested in (if they are safe).
- Older children need to practice sorting things out for themselves, so wait-and-see can be a good first response.

remember

- When your child has your full attention, their whole brain is working. When you are watching TV, texting or talking on the phone, they don't get this benefit.
- Children will know how you are responding to them by watching the expression, the way you use your hands and your body, and listening to the tone of your voice.



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More about... Claiming and attunement

In the first weeks of life, the deepest and most primitive areas of the brain are developing. These parts of the brain will control all the basic functions of the body such as sleeping and waking, appetite, and temperature control. When the parent responds to the baby's attachment behaviours such as crying, back-arching, and chaotic arm and leg movements the baby feels safe. Stress hormones have an adverse effect on this early brain development.

Interaction that matches the needs of the baby produces pleasure hormones in the parent such as *oxytocin* and *endorphins*. Close physical contact between the parent and the baby then triggers production of pleasure hormones in the baby. These hormones provide the best possible environment for brain growth.

A mnemonic for the processes of claiming is ABCD:

- Attention • Bonding • Control • Dependency

To survive, babies must gain the attention of their parents. Parents and babies bond together through scent, taste, touch, sound and parental gaze. To feel safe, babies must gain control of their parents so that they can feel safe. However, once the baby does feel safe this need to control will be replaced by a healthy dependency.

Responding is the beginning of 'mind-mindedness' or 'mindfulness', the ability to give attention to the young child as a creative mind with an inner world of their own. Mindfulness is one of the key attributes of parenting for developing infant mental health.



cuddle



cuddle



cuddle

cuddle

“ 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.”

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.
- Toddlers love giving as well as receiving all these different types of physical contact

remember

- Children need touch that soothes (cuddles) and touch that stimulates (tickles).



cuddle

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More about... The importance of touch

All sorts of touch can be included in the concept of 'cuddle': stroking, patting, holding, feeding, hair care, nail care, massage, being carried, holding hands, and many more interactions involving physical contact.

Physical contact is essential for healthy brain development, and the second step of the attachment process is physical attunement, in which the bodies of the baby and the parent begin to work together in harmony, with the physiology of each changing to match the other. For example, when stressed the baby cries. When the baby cries, the adult becomes stressed. The parent then tends to the baby, removing the source of the stress if possible (feeding, changing nappy, changing position, and so on). But crucially the parent will also soothe the baby, rocking, patting or stroking, making soothing sounds.

When the adult soothes the baby the most important thing that happens is that the adult's own state of stress reduces. Heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tone all return to a calm state, and the attuned baby physically follows suit. This baby is gaining a pattern in the brain linking together soothing activity and physical relaxation, which is the basis of stress regulation for life.

Physical attunement quickly begins to have an impact on other aspects of brain development, especially the right brain which controls emotions and social interaction. Babies are not aware of feelings, they just feel. When the parent shares the feeling and reflects it back to the baby, only then does the baby become aware of having a feeling. So emotional attunement quickly follows physical attunement.



relax



relax



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“ When I feel stressed I need you to help me. My body works in tune with yours, so when I am stressed I need you to calm down! When you feel calm and comfortable, so do I. That calm relaxed feeling fills my body with chemicals that help my brain to grow.”

some suggestions

- Try to end exciting play or activity sessions with a wind-down time in which you and your child can enjoy a few moments of calm.
- Try to have some time when you are just focused on the experience of being with your child, not on things you need to get done, or on people or events that have made you upset or angry.
- 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

- Older children can revert to baby stress patterns when they are tired, ill, over-excited, frightened, or anxious.



relax

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More about... Stress and brain development

Stress hormones such as *adrenaline* and *cortisol* can injure the human brain. Under the impact of unregulated stress, these excessive hormones change blood supply to key areas of the brain such as those that control language and the self-regulation of mood and impulse. This is the organic explanation for the survival mechanism of fight or flight, in which brain functions that slow down response times (such as thinking) are switched off.

If excessive stress is toxic to the adult human brain, it is much more toxic to the rapidly developing brain of a baby. Yet human babies are not born able to self-regulate stress. They must acquire this ability through attunement to at least one adult who can self-regulate their own stress. As the adult relaxes the attuned baby also relaxes, and this builds patterns in the brain enabling the child to begin to self-regulate.

So relaxation is a vital activity for parents. Relaxation techniques can be learned, and learning to relax in the presence of the child is a key skill for all parents.

When relaxation is impossible for a parent, perhaps because they are experiencing a mental disorder such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, then they can help their baby's brain development by making sure that the baby does have access to at least one reliable adult who can relax with the child.

Like all these brain-building activities, relaxation in the parent can involve both soothing and stimulation. Sometimes when a child is in an agitated state they can only be soothed by the parent matching the level of stimulus so that the child re-attunes to the parent. Then when the parent relaxes the child is able to relax with them.



play



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“ 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. As I get older, playing with me and helping me to play on my own or with other children builds connections in my brain that make it possible for me to think and plan, to make sense of the world around me, and to develop social skills.”

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.
- Explore shapes, colours and textures with your child. You could look at picture books together, or make simple toys and pictures with pens, paper, fabric, etc.

remember

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



play

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More about... The importance of play

At every opportunity during the day when a young child needs stimulation, play can provide it. For young babies this can include wakeful times after feeding, during and after nappy changes, and at any time when the baby is actively seeking stimulation. Older children thrive on play, and love it when parents are playful without being intrusive.

Play can also be used for soothing, especially by stepping down from high-stimulus interaction through gentle play to full relaxation.

- Play involving facial expressions builds brain patterns for recognising feelings in self and others. As the adult follows the lead of the baby, and then alternates leading and following in copying facial expressions and accompanying gestures, this also develops turn-taking and the ability to take part in conversations.
- Tongue play (wiggling the tongue, blowing raspberries, and so on) builds brain patterns linking together tongue control, human communication and pleasure. This is pre-speech, making the baby more ready to develop speech and language.
- Physical play builds motor brain function. This can include finger play, hand play, balancing games, dancing, crawling, jumping, running, ball play, skipping, and climbing.
- Matching, counting, hiding, and giving-and-taking games all build pre-cognitive patterns in the brain. These patterns will underpin later cognitive function, so that the child will be able to think more effectively.

It is very important that play is not confused with having toys. All sorts of ordinary objects can be used in play. And most importantly, play involves interaction between people.



talk



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“ When you talk to me I copy you. At first I can only make a few sounds, but the more you talk to me the more I can make sounds into words... 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.”

some suggestions

- Read to your baby regularly, even when they are very young, and use as many rhymes, poems or songs as you can. Simple rhymes and rhythms will hold their attention.
- 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.
- As children get older, word play and jokes help develop verbal skills and social awareness

remember

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



talk

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More about... The importance of communication

All sorts of verbal communication can be included in the category of 'talking'. Talking builds brain patterns for language development, cognitive function and social interaction.

Words are therefore vital to the child's pre-cognitive patterning. Strengthening the language centres of the brain also improves self-regulation, as feelings are processed through expressing them in language.

Listening is also a vital part of verbal communication. Parents listen to the baby, and then echo the sounds the baby is making, which reinforces the development of meaningful speech. Being listened to with interest also creates brain patterns for self-worth and self-esteem, which further reinforce the capacity for self-regulation.

Reading with young children provides a great opportunity for talking and listening, as well as promoting physical contact and developing interest in the written word.

Singing is also a wonderful way to communicate words to a baby. And if the parents are becoming stressed they can be encouraged to switch from talking to singing, which may relax them and will reduce the stress in their voice as they communicate with the child.

Different ways of using words at different times or on different occasions can help the baby build pre-cognitive brain patterns such as internal awareness of time, cause and effect, or distinguishing between fact and fantasy.

