



What You Can Do to Support Babies' Brain Development From 2 to 6 Months

Vision

It is through vision that babies get information about the people and things around them. Observing the world helps babies to fine tune the connections between brain cells. By giving babies interesting things to look at, you help their brain's vision area fully develop.

Between 2 and 6 months babies get better at scanning, tracking (following an object with their eyes), and focusing on objects. Babies can see in color, and especially enjoy looking at moving objects such as mobiles or their caregivers' faces as they interact with them.

Look at your home from the babies' point of view. Are there enough interesting things to look at? Is there perhaps too much to look at, making it difficult to focus on one thing at a time? Remember you don't need to buy fancy toys (like black and white mobiles) for the babies in your care. A set of shiny or colored measuring spoons can be a perfect "mobile" when carefully hung by a piece of elastic.

Make sure that babies see your face and your expressions. Babies will be watching your every move. Make eye contact with them and smile a lot.

Make eye contact during daily routines like feeding and diapering. Have things for babies to look at during these routines such as pictures covered with clear contact paper that can be taped to the wall.

Hearing

Talking with and singing to babies is very important. As they hear new sounds, the connections in the brain increase and become stronger. Talking with babies helps them eventually learn language and the meaning of words.

Sharing music also provides important sensory information to the baby's developing brain. However, *constant* music may overstimulate some infants or they may tune it out.

Talk with the babies in your care. Give them time to respond. They may make their own facial expressions, sounds, and body movements in response, or just make eye contact with you.

Sing to babies. During daily routines, sharing a song with a baby can make an ordinary task into a joyful experience. Don't worry about what you think of the quality of your voice. Babies don't judge. They just love to hear your voice.

Expose babies to various styles of music. It's important though to keep the volume low. Babies' hearing can be damaged by loud music. Choose music thoughtfully—play different types of music with a variety of rhythms, instruments, and beats. Watch to see what kinds of music each baby prefers.



What You Can Do to Support Babies' Brain Development From 2 to 6 Months

Touch

Touch is an important source of sensory information during the 2–6 month age period. A loving touch from parents and caregivers helps build a sense of trust. Being held in a caregiver's arms lets babies know that they are safe, secure, and loved.

It is also through touch that babies learn about the properties of the objects in their world (such as their texture and shape). This builds their thinking skills.

Respond to babies' signals that they need comfort or interaction. They can show their need by crying, fussing, reaching for you, or gazing toward you to engage you.

Provide other "touch" experiences for the baby. Even at this very early age, a baby needs a variety of tactile experiences. Put him on different surfaces such as towels, blankets with different textures, or straw mats. Rub noses, touch elbows, and pat knees. Let the babies (safely) touch sticky surfaces, smooth surfaces, bumpy surfaces like bubble wrap, and cool surfaces.

Sleep

As the brain develops and becomes more mature, babies' sleep becomes more regular and predictable. When you see signs of drowsiness such as droopy eyelids or a decrease in activity and alertness, it's a good time to ease baby into sleep. Letting babies get overtired can make falling asleep more difficult for them.

Keep routines as consistent as possible. Find out from families how their baby likes to sleep. Try to provide a similar experience while they are in your care.

Create an environment that encourages sleep. Light, sound, and even temperature may affect the brain's sleep centers. So make sure the nap area is darkened and quiet, and keep the space at a moderate temperature.

Put babies to sleep on their backs. Research shows that babies sleeping on their backs can reduce the incidence of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).



What You Can Do to Support Babies' Brain Development From 2 to 6 Months

Movement

Movement helps babies learn how to balance and gain control over their bodies. This includes moving side to side as when swaying, moving up and down as when being bounced, and moving back and forth as when walking in someone's arms.

Allow babies to move and develop their physical skills at their pace. Don't force new skills—for example, holding a baby up to stand will not make her walk faster or better. Notice how each baby's physical skills are growing over time, and give them opportunities to master new skills when you see they are ready.

Put babies in areas on the floor where it is safe to move around. Encourage rolling, crawling, and walking by placing interesting toys close by.

Do not use baby walkers. They can lead to an increased risk of accidents. Avoid overusing automatic baby swings as well. Too much time in a swing means that babies are not being held, touched, and played with by a caregiver. This equipment also limits the time babies are able to use their bodies to explore—such as rolling to get closer to a desired person or interesting toy.

Play

Babies play by looking, listening, touching, tasting, and moving. As babies play, important sensory information is sent to their growing brains. Playful interactions with parents and caregivers are very important as babies learn that their actions have an effect on both the people and objects in their world. Play time with you influences all areas of their development: intellectual, physical, social, and emotional.

Keep babies safe. For young babies, play usually means mouthing everything they can place their hands on. *Make sure toys are cleaned regularly and that all choking hazards are removed from the play area.*

Show pleasure as you play with the babies. Stick out your tongue and see if they will copy you. Talk about what you are doing together as you play, and use facial expressions. This provides more information to the baby, which increases her engagement and, therefore, her brain power.

Use routines (changing a diaper, arriving/ departing, and waking from a nap) as chances to pay individual attention to each baby. Diaper changing can be a time to “play” with feet, tickle toes and nose, talk about all his great body parts, and wash each finger when you are finished.

Provide safe and interesting objects to look at and explore as babies grow. Provide toys with a variety of colors, textures, and sizes (e.g., rattles, balls with different textures, soft objects), and watch to see which each baby is most interested in.



What You Can Do to Support Babies' Brain Development From 2 to 6 Months

Crying

Crying is a primary way that babies communicate. It is important to respond when babies cry as it lets them know: "I hear you. I am trying to figure out what you want. Your needs and feelings are important." Responding to babies sensitively and consistently supports healthy brain development as it calms them and reduces their stress. Research shows that high levels of stress can negatively impact a young child's growing brain.

Walk, rock, talk quietly, and sing to babies. Try rhythmic rocking motions. Swaddle babies in a blanket or carry them in a sling or front pack if possible. Use soft music, lullabies, or sounds that your babies find soothing. Help babies find a safe object for sucking such as their fist or a pacifier. You can also try walking a baby to a different room or outside, if possible.

Try to figure out what the cry is communicating. Look for patterns in the babies' cries to see if you can detect differences in cries for hunger, a soiled diaper, fatigue, being overwhelmed, or, perhaps, bored. Are there certain times of day or situations when a baby seems more distressed? Why might that be? (Also keep in mind that sometimes young babies just cry and there isn't always a "reason." Just being there to love and comfort the baby until the spell passes is doing a lot.)

Talk to parents to share information and ideas. This kind of communication helps everyone. You and parents can learn from each other by sharing your observations about the baby—what you think different cries mean, patterns you notice—and strategies that work to soothe the baby. The baby benefits from this kind of collaboration among the people who care so much about him as his basic needs get met, which supports his growing brain.