

What Makes a Baby's Environment Stimulating?

The scientific evidence is clear. A baby who lives in a stimulating environment develops more brain connections. This can have a lifelong positive impact on the child's intelligence.

Just what makes a baby's world stimulating? Some parents mistakenly think that buying expensive learning toys is the answer. In reality, a stimulating environment is one in which a curious baby can safely explore and try things. Since babies learn through their senses, they need lots of opportunities to touch, taste, smell, hear, and see interesting things. Fortunately, providing such opportunities does not require lots of money. It just takes an understanding of babies' needs and a willingness to meet them.

A baby's environment is any place that the baby goes. Besides the child's own room and home, his or her environment might include a child care center, grandparent's house, the neighborhood seen from a stroller ride, and the supermarket. All of these places can provide opportunities for babies to experience new things and learn through their senses.

SENSORY STIMULATION

Each sense develops at its own rate. Together, they give infants information about their world.

Vision

Newborns can only see objects at close range to their faces. They see best with their *peripheral vision*, or from the sides of their eyes. Caregivers can stimulate vision at this age by slowly moving toys or other objects within the newborn's field of vision. Another way to provide visual stimulation is to allow the baby to focus on your face. You can hold the baby close to your face while widening your eyes and moving your head slowly back and forth.

By three months of age, most babies like to watch objects that move in circles, such as mobiles. Babies also enjoy looking in a mirror. They often favor bright colors and patterns that have a sharp contrast. Their eyesight improves quickly, and they soon may be able to see better than their parents!

Hearing

Babies can distinguish between sounds at a very early age. Most newborns will turn their heads and eyes in the direction of human voices. Many experts believe that babies can identify their mother's voice even before they are born.

What Makes a Baby's Environment Stimulating?

Hearing sounds is important for language development. Reading books, playing music, talking, and singing are all simple ways to expose babies to sounds and prepare them for language development. It is important to converse with them by responding to their babbling and other sounds they make.

Touch

Newborns need to be touched by their caregivers to develop normally. Holding and cuddling babies stimulates their brains to release the hormones needed for growth. Being soothed by touch also reduces stress in babies and teaches them how to calm themselves. Massaging infants' arms and legs and stroking their hair are good ways to stimulate the sense of touch. Even routine activities, such as dressing and changing diapers, are opportunities to provide nurturing touch.

As babies' motor skills develop during their first year, they begin to reach out and use their sense of touch to explore objects in their environment. Babies need a safe environment that contains objects with various textures, shapes, and sizes. Most babies enjoy playing and splashing during their bath. Plastic cups and floating boats or other toys help them experiment with the water.

Of course, they need constant supervision while they are in water.

Smell and Taste

The sense of smell allows babies to bond with their mothers as soon as they are born. As babies become familiar with the smells around them, the smells can be used to comfort them. For example, it may be possible to soothe a crying baby by placing a cloth that has the mother's scent near the baby. A natural preference for familiar smells may be why young children do not like to have their favorite blankets or stuffed animals washed.

Initially, the sense of taste is stimulated as babies progress from drinking breast milk or formula to other foods. Once they are able to bring objects to their mouths, babies also use the sense of taste to explore their world. Later, most babies enjoy sampling new foods.

You can stimulate their natural curiosity by encouraging older babies to smell a flower. Allow babies to explore as much as possible, but keep a watchful eye. They may attempt to taste the dirt from a potted plant or the sand in the sandbox.

A stimulating and nurturing environment has long-term benefits for children. Those who receive warm and stimulating care tend to have stronger attachments to their caregivers. They also tend to do better in school and can manage stress more easily than children who received less stimulation. However, it is possible for a baby's

What Makes a Baby's Environment Stimulating?

environment to be overly stimulating. Caregivers need to watch for indications that babies are being over-stimulated and provide them with adequate quiet time.

Directions: Imagine that your family will be caring for a foster child—a four-month-old baby boy. The room that will become his nursery is a small bedroom that currently has white walls. Design a plan for making the nursery an environment that will be stimulating for the growing baby. Include possible décor, furnishings, and toys you would include.