

What You Need to Know About Your Baby's World And How You Can Help Them Explore It



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Introduction

“As the twig is bent so is the tree inclined” is an old parenting proverb to the effect that, when applied to parenting, means that what your child experiences in the first years of life sets the course for the whole life cycle. This e-book takes you inside your child’s world to help you better understand how children develop and what they experience — allowing you to adapt your parenting to their unique abilities, needs and interests.

The single most important fact about infants and children is they are constantly growing and changing. As parents this means that we have to grow and change along with them. When your baby starts to crawl and walk, for example, you have to “babyproof” his or her living space. The challenge is to set limits and allow freedoms in keeping with the child’s maturing abilities, needs and interests. We do this best if we start from where the child is in his or her development, not from some abstract rule or principle. Adapting flexibly to the needs of the growing child is what nourishes our development as loving and effective parents.

Decades of research shows that infants and children who receive age appropriate, loving childrearing develop a sense of trust, of autonomy, of initiative, and of industry that will serve them well in their progress towards maturity. That is why understanding the stages of children’s emotional, language, intellectual and social development is critical to effective and successful parenting.

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It is important to make clear; however, that although we as adults can separate emotional, language, intellectual and social development, the infant makes no such divisions. Infants operate as functioning wholes and all the facets of their developing personalities are closely entwined.

For example, a baby’s cries are at once a means of communication, an expression of an unpleasant emotion, and a need for social interaction. Accordingly, when interacting with your baby, it is important to realize that you are responding at many different levels at once.



Understanding Your Child's Developing Emotions

At birth, your infant has a few basic feelings such as pleasure, pain and fear. With age and experience, these become more elaborate and combine to form more complex emotions. Even a young infant can tell you what she feels through her body language and cries. For example, a baby who is relaxed and comfortable presents a very different picture from one who is tense and irritable.

By watching your infant's emotional reactions you can tell what pleases her and what makes her unhappy. In this respect, as in many others, babies are quite different from one another. An otherwise easy going baby, for example, may really hate being changed even though she is not uncomfortable. It is just the act of changing that she dislikes. Other infants may not like hats and may take them off as soon as they can. If we are alert to the kinds of actions or objects that make the baby uncomfortable, we can anticipate the reaction and try to lessen it through calming words and gentle touches.

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From an early age infants also respond to our emotions, and are quick to respond to our feelings of happiness or distress. If you find yourself experiencing these feelings during the day, while you should not try and hide your emotions from the infant but you might try and avoid being with your infant, if possible, until your emotions are more settled and under control. Likewise, when your baby is upset and cranky, it really helps if you remain calm, keep your voice low and soothing and make your actions slow and comforting. As your baby begins to widen her emotional spectrum, you can help her by labeling emotions for her. For example, “I can tell you really like that apple sauce, don't you?”



Understanding Your Child's Developing Communication Skills

As your infant matures, his ability to communicate increases and he can use his body language, as well as his vocalizations, to express his wants, pleasures and dislikes. It is very important for parents to learn to read this non-verbal communication. When you appreciate your baby's signs when, for example, he needs a hug, this helps him to feel understood and contributes to his sense of trust.

Your infant is responsive to your voice even before he leaves the womb. As a newborn, he already prefers the sound of his mother's voice to other sounds.

Maintaining a language rich environment throughout the first year is a major contributor to healthy language development, and you can help your child along by doing a few simple things. These include talking, singing or cooing while you feed, change or bathe your baby, and telling or reading him stories — even during the first few months of life.



Understanding Your Child's Physical and Social Development

Your baby also gains a better understanding of the physical and social world around her as she grows. This comes about through active exploration of her environment by means of her actions and her senses. For example, no infant is born knowing the difference between red and green, soft and hard, sweet and sour, loud and quiet, rough and smooth. All of these distinctions have to be learned through time-consuming and effortful exploration and trial and error.

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The good news is that it's very easy for you to help your baby understand the physical and social world around her. And you don't need the latest toys and games. Simple toys such as a mobile hung over the crib, a rattle, or a plush toy give her the opportunity to explore objects and to learn their different properties. This helps her to attain a sense of control over her world by being able to impose an order upon it. As your baby matures and her motor coordination improves, she will begin to coordinate what she sees with what she touches and hears. These coordinations all take time and repetition to learn, but they are very important attainments. Eventually your baby will be able to construct a mental image of an object, such as a ball, and will, for example, be able to point to it in a book when you say its name. This is another example of how language, motor coordination and sensory discrimination work together give your baby a sense of a stable, trustworthy world.

Because the world is so new to your baby, the only way she can learn about it is through her own interaction with objects. That is why it is so important to resist the temptation to give your baby high-tech toys; it is a little bit like asking your baby to run before she can walk. There will be plenty of time for your infant to engage with high tech toys when she is older. The important thing is for her to learn about the real world before learning about the virtual one.

Frederich Froebel, the inventor of the kindergarten, put it well when he said, “Children need to learn the language of things before they learn the language of words.” If we keep

the world of the infant simple, yet rich in basic toys and abundant language, we provide the best environment for healthy mental development.

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Your child’s social development is part and parcel of all of the other developments described above. For example, your baby is near-sighted at birth and does not focus very well. By the end of the first month, however, vision has improved and your infant can make visual eye contact with you. This is always a wonderful event as, in that moment, you get the wonderful feeling that you are dealing with a real person.

From day one, your infant prefers human voices to all other sounds and responds positively when he hears your voice. Towards the end of the first year, thanks to loving care and attention, your baby is able to construct a mental image of you, which increases his attachment to you. But this same mental image and attachment, makes the infant leery of those who don’t fit that image. We see this wariness in the appearance of separation and stranger anxiety. The appearance of separation and stranger anxiety at the same time as the child has become emotionally attached to you, and can mentally represent you in her absence, is but another example of the interplay of emotional, social and intellectual processes in your child. Understanding what underlies behaviors like stranger anxiety and separation anxiety enables you to do a more effective, and more relaxed, job of parenting and supporting your child’s healthy growth and development.

Discover Your Child's World at Just Ask Baby

Imagine if you could get inside your baby's world to get a sense of what they are seeing, hearing, touching, doing and thinking? JustAskBaby.com takes you as close as you can get.

Just Ask Baby uses fun and informative science-based videos – filmed from a child's perspective – to give you the insight and information you need to support your unique child's growth into a happy, healthy, confident individual. Unsponsored and ad-free, our parenting resources and support networks help you make better-informed parenting decisions as your little one grows from helpless newborn to can-do toddler and beyond.

Take a look at how we can help you help your child at www.justaskbaby.com.



About the Author

Just Ask Baby's Chief Scientific Advisor is the highly respected David Elkind, one of the leading thinkers, researchers and teachers on child development in his generation. David Elkind has spent his life bringing together and advancing the work of some of the greatest thinkers on child development from around the world, including Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson.

David Elkind is currently Professor Emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. He was formerly Professor of Psychology, Psychiatry and Education at the University of Rochester. Professor Elkind obtained his doctorate at U.C.L.A. and then spent a year as David Rapaport's research assistant at the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He was a National Science Foundation Senior Postdoctoral Fellow at Piaget's Institut d'Epistemologie Genetique in Geneva. His research has been in the areas of perceptual, cognitive and social development where he has built upon the research and theory of Jean Piaget.

Professor Elkind has published research, theoretical articles, book chapters and 18 books. He has also written children's stories for Jack and Jill, and been published in the New York Times Magazine, Good Housekeeping, Parade and Psychology Today. Recent articles include Computers and Young Children, The Authority of the Brain, The Cosmopolitan School, On Becoming a Grandfather, and Thanks for the Memory: The Lasting Value of True Play.

Well known for his writings, he is probably best known for his popular books including *The Hurried Child*, a 25th anniversary edition of which was released in 2007, along with Professor Elkind's newest book, *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*.

A member of many professional organizations, Professor Elkind is also on the Editorial Board of numerous scientific journals, and a consultant to state education departments, government agencies and private foundations. He lectures in the United States, Canada and abroad. He's also appeared on *The Today Show*, *The CBS Morning News*, *Twenty/Twenty*, *Nightline*, *Donahue* and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, has been profiled in *People* and *Boston Magazine*, and co-hosted the Lifetime Television Show, *Kids These Days*.

At university Professor Elkind fell in love with psychology. His doctorate was in clinical psychology, where he was trained as a Freudian. He took his postdoc with David Rapaport, a noted Freudian scholar who introduced Professor Elkind to Jean Piaget.

Professor Elkind has three sons and four granddaughters. He enjoys gardening, sailing and has recently taken up pottery.

Tune into David Elkind's blog at www.justaskbaby.com/blogs/professor-elkind to read more about, and comment on, his experiences, opinions and insights on children's perceptual, cognitive and social development.

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