

Developmental stimulation

The most rapid changes in development occur during the first year of life. A baby grows from a helpless little bundle into a walking, talking, unique personality. Almost all parents wonder if their baby is developing at the right pace. There is wide variation in normal development. Although the average child walks at 12 months, the normal age for walking is any time between 9 and 16 months of age. Motor development occurs in an orderly sequence, starting with lifting the head, then rolling over, sitting up, crawling, standing, and walking. Although the sequence is predictable and follows the maturation of the spinal cord downward, the rate at which these stages happen varies. Speech develops from cooing to babbling, to imitating speech sounds, to first words, to using words together. Again, however, the normal rate can vary considerably.

The most reassuring signs that a child is developing normally are an alert facial expression, alert eyes, and curiosity about his or her surroundings. The main determinant of a child's social, emotional, and language development is the amount of positive contact he or she has with his parents. The experiences during the first 3 years of life determine the permanent "wiring" of the brain.

Ways to Stimulate Your Child's Normal Development

- 1. Hold your baby as much as possible.** Touching and cuddling is good for your baby. Give him or her lots of eye contact, smiles, and affection. Use feedings as a special opportunity for these warm personal interactions.
- 2. Talk to your baby.** Babies of all ages enjoy being talked and sung to. Babies must first hear language before they can use it themselves. You don't need a script--just put into words whatever you are thinking and feeling.
- 3. Play with your baby.** If this doesn't come easy for you, try to loosen up and rediscover your free spirit. Respond to your baby's attempts to initiate play. Provide your baby with various objects of interest. Toys need not be expensive; for example, homemade mobiles, rattles, spoons, pots and pans, and boxes. Encourage your baby's efforts at discovering how to use his or her hands and mind.
- 4. Read to your baby.** Even 4-month-olds enjoy looking at pictures in a book. Cut out interesting pictures from magazines and put them in a scrapbook for your baby. Look at the family photo album. By 8 months of age, begin reading stories to your child.
- 5. Show your baby the world.** Enrich his or her experience. Point out leaves, clouds, stars, and rainbows. Help your toddler describe what she sees or experiences. Everything we see or do has a name.
- 6. Provide your child with social experiences with other children by age 2 years.** If he or she is not in day care, consider starting or joining a play group. Young children can learn important lessons from each other, especially how to get along with other people.
- 7. Avoid formal teaching until age 4 or 5.** Some groups have recently overemphasized academic (cognitive) development of young children. The effort to create "superkids" through special lessons, drills, computer programs, and classes can put undue pressure on young children and may result in an early loss of interest in learning. Old-fashioned creative play and spontaneous learning provide a foundation for later academic efforts and are much more beneficial during the early years.