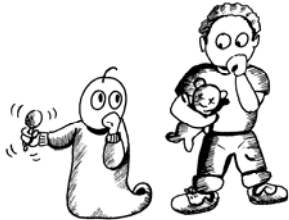


# ***STIMULATION***

## **DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE**



There is nothing more important to developing children than exposure to a stimulating environment. A stimulating environment is one that offers children many interesting things to do, see, hear and touch. It is the parents' role to provide a stimulating environment for their children. During the first year of life, the amount of positive contact parents have with their babies will affect their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. The more parents interact with their young children the more rapidly they will develop.

Stimulation has other benefits too. Parents who provide a stimulating environment for their children are letting them know that they are important. They are also getting to know their children and letting their children get to know them. In turn, the closer parents are to their

children, the better they will be at providing a stimulating environment.

Parents should think of stimulation as play. Play stimulates infants to use their bodies and senses. It helps develop thinking and intelligence. The most important part, though, is fun. Play has to be fun for both infants and parents, or neither will want to take part.

Babies seek stimulation from their environment. Just about any activity can be stimulating. For example, simply changing a diaper stimulates the sense of touch. Parents who talk to their babies face-to-face stimulate both the senses of hearing and sight (babies study the faces of people who speak to them). Many everyday activities are stimulating to infants. Parents can also stimulate their infants in more specific ways. They can do this by playing games geared to stimulate specific areas of development. These types of games and activities will be discussed later in this handout.

### **Getting Started**

Remember, stimulation should be fun for both parents and their children. Interacting with children does not have to be complicated, either. Many of the ways parents already play with

their children are forms of stimulation. Play time should be a part of every baby's daily schedule. Parents should consider it part of their babies' education. The following are some suggestions for incorporating stimulation into the daily routine:

**\*Provide love.** Loving a baby comes naturally to almost all parents. Nothing will help babies grow and thrive more than simple love and acceptance from their parents. In fact, a close relationship with parents and/or caregivers is necessary for normal development.

**\*Interact with your baby.** Parents should take every opportunity to talk and sing to their babies. There are many opportunities in any given day for parents to interact with their infants. Parents can talk or sing to their babies while changing a diaper, giving a bath, shopping for groceries, or driving in the car. Again, the goal is for parents to be involved with and communicate with their babies.

**\*Get to know your baby.** Parents should discover what their babies like and dislike. They should try to find out what kinds of stimulation their babies respond to and what types they seem to dislike. Generally, babies will pay attention to stimuli

they like. They tend to withdraw from stimulation that doesn't interest them or is too much for them. Parents should use this knowledge to guide their interactions with their babies. Remember, all babies are unique individuals. Parents will learn more about their babies **from** their babies than from any textbook or other source of information. Parents should pay attention to their babies' moods, too. When they're in a quiet mood, quiet play is probably what they will respond to. When they're in a lively, active mood, they may enjoy more rambunctious play. Again, parents should pay attention. Their babies will let them know what they need and want in the form of interaction.

**\*Enjoy your baby.** Babies learn at their own pace. Parents shouldn't worry about their babies' performance. Any pressure from parents will hinder, not help, their babies' development. So, relax and enjoy.

**\*Give your baby space.** It is important that parents pay attention to their infants. It is also important that parents know when to leave their babies alone. If parents constantly hover over their babies, the babies will never learn how to entertain themselves. If parents solve every

problem for their children, they won't learn how to solve problems on their own.

**\*Let your baby lead.** Parents should let their babies direct the play. Parents who let their children take the lead are letting their babies know that their interests are important. This way parents will know that the games they are playing are interesting to their children. Parents should let their babies decide, too, when enough is enough. Signs of overstimulation include turning away, fussing, crying, or otherwise showing disinterest or displeasure. Parents should not ignore these messages from their babies. If they do, the result will be a play time that is a lot less fun for their babies.

**\*Time stimulation to your baby's level of development.** Stimulation must be appropriate for each baby's level of development. If parents go too far over their babies' heads, they will likely frustrate both their children and themselves. If the games parents play with their babies are "too easy," their babies will probably become bored with them quickly. To provide the right type of stimulation, parents must know their children's present level of development. For example, if parents notice that their children are beginning to learn how to roll over

from the back to the stomach, they can stimulate this developing skill by placing an object at their babies' side just out of reach. Their babies will then have to roll over to get the object. The key is for parents to know what new skills their babies are working on and then to direct play to stimulate these developing skills.

**\*Interact at the right time.** The best time for parents to stimulate and play with their babies is during active wakefulness for physical activities and during quiet wakefulness for other types of learning. Parents should remember that infants have very short attention spans. To babies, even ten minutes is a very long time! Parents should remember, too, that their babies' reactions are much slower than those of adults. Parents should give their babies a chance to respond. Be patient.

**\*Show approval.** Showing approval is the earliest way in which parents can help their children establish an inner drive toward achievement. Parents can show approval with hugs, kisses, cheers, applause - whatever is comfortable.

## **More Specific Ways to Stimulate Babies**

### **Birth to Six Months**

## Vision

The sense of vision develops rapidly during the first six months of life. At birth vision is blurred, but by the end of the first month, infants will be able to see faces and distinct patterns. Intellectual development and learning begin with eye contact and visual tracking. Visual tracking is the ability of babies to follow moving objects with their eyes. Thus stimulation of the sense of sight is very important for infants. During the first month, most babies learn to focus on objects at a distance of 8-10 inches. At one month of age, babies are usually able to follow objects with their eyes. This new skill will get progressively better in the coming months. Between four and six months most babies gradually become able to focus on objects at any distance. They will also follow any moving object that catches their attention.

Here are some things parents can do to stimulate their babies' sense of sight:

Show and provide:

**\*Contrasts and colors** - When choosing toys for babies and decorating babies' rooms, parents should keep in mind that babies like sharp contrasts (such as black and

white) and bright, bold colors (especially red).

**\*A mobile** - Hang mobiles no more than 12 inches over babies' faces. Parents should make sure that their babies can see the figures on the mobile from their perspective. Most babies prefer to gaze to one side or the other instead of straight up. So, parents should find out their babies' favorite gaze direction and hang the mobile to that side of the crib.

**\*Stationary objects** - Babies spend a lot of time looking at things around them. Parents should make sure their babies have a lot of interesting objects to look at. Parents can show their babies geometric patterns, hand-drawn faces, or anything they think might be interesting to their babies.

**\*Mirrors** - Most babies love to look at themselves and others in a mirror. Parents should make sure the mirror is a safe, metal baby mirror.

**\*Books** - Parents can show their babies pictures in books. Babies prefer simple, bold-colored drawings without a lot of extra detail.

**\*People** - Babies love to look at faces close-up. Parents should spend lots of time up close to their babies. They

should also encourage other family members to do the same.

**\*Toys** - Babies especially like to look at toys with faces, either human or animal, that have large, staring eyes. Once babies begin to track objects, they will especially enjoy toys that wind up and move.

The key to stimulating the sense of sight is providing babies with a variety of interesting things to look at. Parents should change their babies' position and location often so that they have a change of scenery and perspective. Changing positions will encourage babies to look around alertly. It's also important to move the objects babies look at often and to change them from time to time. Parents should show their babies only one object at a time to avoid overstimulation. Parents should take their babies out of the house often and show them the world outdoors. A simple walk around the block, to the store, or to a nearby park will provide babies with many new and interesting things to see.

## Hearing

The sense of hearing is fairly well-developed in the infant at birth. In fact, it is thought that infants are able to hear sounds **in the womb** up to

four months before birth. When stimulating babies' sense of hearing, parents should remember that most babies prefer the sound of the human voice more than any other sound. This is why it is important for parents to **talk** to their babies as much as possible. Remember, too, that it is through hearing that infants learn about language. By the time babies reach one month of age, they will be able to physically respond to sounds in some way, such as by startling, crying, or quieting.

Here are some forms of auditory stimulation:

**\*The human voice** - This is the most important sound in every baby's life. Parents should let their babies hear their voices often. They should talk and sing to their babies every chance they get. Some parents may feel awkward at first. They should just relax and give it a try. It will get easier. Parents can also try imitating the sounds their babies make. This will encourage babies to make the sounds again. Parents can use their voices, also, to imitate sounds their babies regularly hear, such as a cat, a dog, or a bird.

**\*A rattle** - Or any other toy that makes sound. Parents should make sure that the sound the toy makes is

not upsetting to their babies, or too loud. Parents can try shaking a rattle or ringing a small bell behind their babies. At first babies may startle at new sounds, but they will soon begin to turn their heads toward the sounds they hear.

**\*Music boxes and musical toys** - Infants will quickly learn to recognize specific tunes.

**\*Records and tapes** - Babies enjoy listening to children's tapes and other kinds of music. Parents should try many different types of music. Parents can observe their babies to determine their favorites.

## **Touch**

There is no better way for parents to show love for their babies than to provide close, loving, physical contact. Babies need close physical contact with their parents to thrive. It is especially important that parents hold and cuddle their babies as much as possible. When babies achieve adequate head control, parents can try carrying them in a carrier pack as they do household chores. Changing diapers and bathing babies are also examples of everyday activities that stimulate the sense of touch.

Here are some other ways to stimulate the sense of touch:

**\*Gentle caresses** - Parents can try razzing their babies' bellies with their lips or gently tickling their tummies and legs. Most babies love this. Parents can also try blowing on their babies' bellies, fingers, toes - wherever they seem to enjoy.

**\*Massage** - Parents can try gently rubbing and stroking their babies. Parents can discover the kinds of strokes their babies seem to enjoy and the areas of the body they like to have massaged.

**\*Exposure to different textures** - Parents can try rubbing their babies' skin with different textures, such as terry cloth, silk, fake fur, and velvet. This will show babies how different things feel. Parents can also stimulate touch by placing their babies on a variety of surfaces such as on the carpet, on a linoleum floor, or on a fake fur coat.

**\*Toys** - Parents should provide their babies with toys that have interesting textures. For example, a soft, plush teddy bear and a coarse-haired one, soft terry cloth blocks and wooden ones.

## **Gross Motor Development**

Providing adequate health care and proper nutrition are two very important things parents can do for their babies to enhance gross motor (big muscle) development. Adequate health care includes well-child checkups as well as sick-child care.

The movements of newborn babies are mostly random and reflexive in nature. As their babies grow, parents will notice more and more deliberate movement from their babies. One of the best things parents can do for their babies to promote gross motor development is to give their babies the space to move. Parents should try not to keep their babies cooped up in infant seats or wrapped up in blankets. Babies need the freedom to learn how their bodies work. They will only be able to do this by moving around.

As mentioned earlier, it is important for parents to change their babies' position often during the day. Not only will this allow babies to see the world. It will also encourage them to explore new and different ways of moving. For example, placing children on their stomachs gives them the opportunity to learn to lift their heads. This position will also promote learning to roll over from the stomach to the back.

Here are specific things parents can do to encourage gross motor development in their babies:

**\*Practice sitting.** While their babies are lying on their backs, parents can slowly and gently pull them by the arms into a sitting position. This exercise will encourage head and neck control.

**\*Prop in a sitting position.** Parents can prop their babies in a sitting position. This will also encourage head control and neck muscle strength. Make sure, though, that the head and neck are supported. Most babies do not have full head control until about six months of age.

**\*Encourage rolling.** To encourage rolling over, parents can put an interesting object to the side of their babies while they are lying on their backs.

**\*Encourage creeping.** To encourage creeping, parents can let their babies push off against their hands while lying on their stomachs.

**\*Encourage eye/hand coordination.** Parents can hold an interesting object just out of reach in front of their babies, but off to one side. This will encourage eye/hand coordination as

babies reach for the object. Hanging objects within reach above the crib will also stimulate eye/hand coordination.

### **Fine Motor Development**

At birth, the hand movements of infants are controlled by what is called the grasp reflex. During the first month of life, infants will involuntarily grasp objects that are put into their hands when their fingers are pried open. After the first month, the grasp reflex begins to disappear. By two months of age, grasp will become voluntary.

The best way parents can stimulate the development of fine motor skills is to give their babies' hands plenty of freedom. Parents should try to keep their babies' hands uncovered as much as possible (provided they are kept warm). Parents should make sure, too, that they provide many interesting objects that are small enough for little hands to pick up and move around (but not small enough to swallow). Objects such as rattles, blocks, soft blocks, cradle gyms and activity boards aid in the development of fine motor skills.

Here are some activities to stimulate fine motor development:

**\*Practice grasping.** Parents can place a small object in their babies' grasp; then gently pull.

**\*Practice reaching.** Parents can hold small, interesting objects out for their babies to reach for. Parents should offer objects off to one side instead of right in front of their babies. Parents should make their babies work just a little to get ahold of the object. This activity will not only stimulate eye/hand coordination and grasp. It will also provide babies with a sense of achievement when they succeed in getting ahold of an object.

**\*Challenge them.** As babies mature they will get better and better at grasping objects. They will then be able to pick up smaller and smaller objects. They will slowly hold them for longer and longer periods of time. Parents can challenge their babies by offering them a wide variety of objects in all shapes and sizes to reach for and to grasp.

**\*Offer small foods.** As soon as babies are able to sit up and are eating solid foods, parents can offer them small oat cereal (Cheerios) to grasp and play with.

### **Social Development**



Babies are social creatures. At first they learn how to be social mainly through watching parents and other family members. Later babies will learn, too, from people outside the family. While babies are young, parents can show them how people should behave toward one another by setting a good example.

Here are some activities to stimulate social development:

**\*Talk to them.** Parents should talk to their babies, even though they probably won't understand what parents are saying for quite some time. Parents should also pause in their conversations, too, to give their babies a chance to reply. This will show babies how to carry on a "conversation" with others, which is an important social skill.

**\*Repeat noises.** Parents should repeat the noises their babies make. This will show babies that parents are paying attention to what they're saying, and that what they're saying is meaningful.

**\*Provide social interaction.** Parents should provide opportunities for social interaction. While babies are awake, parents can put them in places where they can see/hear what is going on.

**\*Provide social toys.** Parents should provide social toys - such as stuffed animals, animal mobiles, and dolls. Babies will soon carry on "conversations" with them.

**\*Encourage social smiling.** Parents can encourage social smiling (which emerges at about four months of age) by, of course, smiling at their babies often.

### Language Development

The best way for parents to stimulate language development in their babies is to talk, talk, talk. Babies learn about language by listening to it. Parents should take every opportunity to talk to their babies. Parents should try not to talk non-stop. Instead, they should carry on conversations with their babies, pausing often so that they can respond. When babies begin making babbling sounds, parents can repeat the sounds their babies make back to them. Another thing parents can do to stimulate language development in their children is to point out and name things they see. Talking stimulates auditory, social, and language development. Research has shown that babies who are talked to frequently speak better and perhaps earlier than babies who are rarely spoken to.

## Stimulating the Older Baby

### Six to Twelve Months

Hopefully, as their babies grow, parents will continue to stimulate and interact with them. The most important thing for parents to do is to be **involved** with their babies. As parents practice, they will get to know what games and exercises their babies enjoy. Parents will then be able to adjust these games and exercises to fit their babies' needs.

It's important, too, that parents add new games and exercises to their routines. This will enhance the new skills babies will be perfecting in the months to come.

During the period from six to twelve months, babies will be learning many important new skills. Just to name a few, they will be learning to sit up, to stand, to crawl, and to understand words. Imagine all the new ways for parents to stimulate their children's development.

### Gross Motor

This will be a period of rapid change for most babies. Babies will be learning many new motor skills. Here are some things parents can do to help

their babies' development in this area:

### Head/Neck Control

**\*Hold them upright.** Parents can hold their babies upright for a few minutes at a time, supporting their heads at first, until they have the neck strength to hold their heads steady.

**\*Use carrier packs.** Parents can carry their babies in carrier packs as soon as they have adequate head control.

**\*Upward stimulation.** Parents can place their babies on their stomachs, then hold or shake something interesting above them. Babies will naturally look up toward the sound. This can also be done by making an interesting noise above babies' heads.

### Sitting

Sitting is a skill that children will be working on during the period from about six to eight months. At first babies will only be able to sit alone, unsupported, for a few seconds at a time. Slowly these periods will grow longer. By nine months of age or so, most babies will probably be able to sit without support for long periods of time.

Here are some ways to encourage sitting:

**\*Hold in sitting positions.** Parents can hold their babies in sitting positions, supporting their heads and necks if needed.

**\*Prop them up.** Parents can prop their babies in sitting positions in a soft, safe place.

**\*Sit them on the floor.** Parents can put their babies in sitting positions on the floor with their legs open and their hands in front on the floor between their legs. Hold in this position for a few seconds (if they need the support).

**\*Pull them into position.** Parents can gently pull their babies from lying to sitting positions (this exercise also encourages head/neck control).

### **Creeping/Crawling**

At about six months of age, most infants begin to show the first signs of crawling behavior. Usually sometime after six months, babies begin to creep by propelling themselves on the stomach with their legs, using the arms to steer. Here's how parents can help their children in developing creeping/crawling skills:

**\*Allow them to spend time on their stomachs.** Parents should provide time for their babies to spend on their stomachs. Parents should make sure their babies are in a safe place with plenty of room to move.

**\*Dangle an interesting object.** Parents can hold or place an interesting object in front of their babies, but just out of their reach.

**\*Call to them.** Parents can call to their babies and encourage them to creep short distances.

**\*Let them push off.** While babies are lying on their stomachs, parents can place their hands firmly behind their children's feet and let them push off.

### **Standing/Walking**

Most babies begin to show signs of wanting to stand and walk at around nine to ten months of age. They will probably show this interest by pulling themselves up from a sitting position to a standing position using furniture.

Here are some things parents can do to help their babies learn to stand and walk:

**\*Hold them upright.** Parents can hold their babies in an upright position.

Parents can then let them bear some weight on their feet. Parents can then "walk" them while supporting their weight.

**\*Use a walker or jumper.** Parents can put their babies in a walker or hanging jumper (don't leave them alone, however).

**\*Use sturdy furniture.** Parents can let their babies pull themselves up to a standing position using sturdy furniture that is easy to grasp.

**\*Assist in balancing.** Parents can encourage their babies to take steps while holding onto an adult's hands for balance, not support.

**\*Let them bounce.** Parents can let their babies stand on their laps and bounce.

**\*Hold onto fingers.** Parents can let their babies hold onto an adult's fingers. The adult can then lift their fingers, gently pulling them into a sitting position.

**\* Lift them.** Parents can lift their babies up onto all fours.

## **Fine Motor Development**

Fine motor skills will develop more quickly if parents give their babies plenty of opportunity to use their

hands to manipulate objects, touch, explore, and experiment. By six months of age, most babies begin reaching for objects both in and out of their reach. Eye/hand coordination as well as grasp are steadily improving.

Here are some ways parents can help their babies improve their fine motor skills:

**\*Stimulate grasp.** Parents can place objects into their babies' hands to stimulate grasp. Then gently pull.

**\*Practice reaching.** Parents can provide ample opportunity for their babies to reach for and grasp interesting objects. Some examples are stuffed animals, rattles, blocks, and busy boards.

**\*Practice handing.** Parents can hand objects to their babies, then encourage them to hand them back.

**\*Provide finger foods.** When children begin eating solids, parents can provide plenty of finger-food at mealtimes so their babies can feed themselves.

## **Social Development**

By six months of age, most babies are rapidly becoming more and more involved in social interaction. Babies

this age begin to show much more interest in the people around them. This is a perfect time for parents to encourage socialization since most babies have not yet developed stranger anxiety. There are many things parents can do to encourage socialization:

**\*Expose to different ages.** Parents can expose their children to a variety of people of different ages, from babies to elderly people.

**\*Play social games.** Parents can play social games such as pat-a-cake and peek-a-boo with their babies.

**\*Look at reflections.** Parents can show their babies their reflections in a mirror (make sure it is a safe, metal baby mirror and not a glass one).

**\*Laugh with them.** Parents can giggle, squeal and laugh with their babies.

**\*Tickle them.** Parents can gently tickle their babies.

**\*Be positive.** Parents should set a good example. They should approach situations with optimism to teach their children to be positive.

**\*Show approval.** Parents can reinforce their babies' social behaviors by showing approval.

**\*Expose them to new situations.** Parents should expose their babies to a variety of social situations.

### **Intellectual/Language Development**

From the age of six months on, babies will begin more and more to understand language. They will first understand names, then single words, and finally simple sentences. Babies will understand spoken language much earlier than they will be able to speak it.

It is also during this time that babies will begin to develop simple problem solving skills. Here's how parents can help stimulate language and intellectual skills:

**\*Talk to them.** Parents should talk to their babies often.

**\*Imitate them.** Parents should repeat the sounds their babies make.

**\*Carry on conversations.** Parents can carry on conversations with their babies. They should pause to give their babies a chance to reply.

**\*Make eye contact.** Parents should make eye contact with their babies while talking to them (make physical contact by holding and touching, too).

**\*Read to them.** Parents should read to their babies.

**\*Concentrate on a few words.** When babies appear ready to speak, parents should concentrate on a few simple, important words.

**\*Use visuals.** When introducing a new word, parents should show their babies a drawing or picture of the new word, too.

**\*Encourage curiosity.** Parents should let their babies experiment and explore. Parents can encourage curiosity and creativity by letting their babies do things "their way." Babies learn more through experience than by being told or shown how to do things. Parents should keep in mind, too, that there is nothing wrong if babies play with toys in unusual ways. If babies prefer to look at a book upside down, that's okay. Babies are always experimenting and learning. Parents shouldn't limit their babies' experiences by believing that there is a "right way" to do things.

**\*Spill water.** Parents can fill a cup with water in the bathtub and let their babies turn it over. This will teach the concept of cause and effect.

**\*Cover toys.** Parents can cover a toy with a cloth and then have their babies look for it. This will show babies that objects still exist, even if they can't be seen.

**\*Introduce concepts.** Parents can introduce concepts like the coffee cup is hot, the teddy bear is soft, the car goes fast. Babies will soon begin to understand what is meant.

There are many interesting and exciting ways parents can stimulate the development of their children. Most are probably doing, or have done, many of the exercises mentioned here. Parents should use their imaginations to come up with fun and interesting things to do with their babies. Children will thrive with the love, interaction, and growth that accompanies stimulating activities.



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