

Your preterm baby's development

This leaflet has been written by experts in preterm development from the North West London Perinatal Network.

Parents often ask for advice about preterm baby development and we hope you will find the information helpful.

If, after you have read it, you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Neonatal Unit.

Contact information

Neonatal Unit
T: 020 3315 7883/4

Notes

This is also the age when play becomes more constructive so encourage your baby to put things into containers, fit pegs into holes, and put one brick on top of another. They may also want to imitate what you do—wiping with a cloth, brushing hair etc.

Praise your children when they play quietly—especially on their own—and try to ignore behaviour that you do not like rather than letting yourself get cross. Getting cross gives children a lot of attention and can actually encourage them to do the same thing again.

How to get help

Some babies need more specific help with development. If you have worries or would like more information ask your GP, Health Visitor, the people you see at hospital follow-up, or your local children's centre. Your Health Visitor can also give you information about local groups and activities suitable for babies, such as those run by the Sure Start programme.

You may find the following websites useful:

- www.zerotothree.org
- www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk

Chelsea and Westminster Hospital

369 Fulham Road
London, SW10 9NH

T: 020 8746 8000
W: www.chelwest.nhs.uk

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Helping your baby to pay attention and to learn

Activities that encourage concentration, attention and learning are particularly important for preterm infants. Babies born preterm are more likely to find it difficult to do things than other children. This may not be obvious when they are very young but may become more so as they face more complex tasks as they grow and go to school.

Helping all babies born preterm to develop their concentration and attention skills from an early age is a good idea. Interaction between parent and infant is the most important activity of all.

General points

Preterm babies have two ages—one is the age from birth (chronological age) and the other is the age from the expected due date (developmental or corrected age).

A baby born three months early will probably reach the usual three-month milestones at six months from birth (ie three months corrected age). It is helpful to bear this in mind when your baby has developmental checks in the first two years. After two years chronological age is often used. The stages given in this leaflet are based on corrected age.

It is more difficult for babies and children to concentrate and learn when there is constant background noise, especially from the television. In the first year or two experts recommend no more than 30 minutes of television per day (including DVDs and videos).

Set aside times for quiet play during the day, and time to read and talk to your baby without distracting background sounds. Being surrounded by many bright colours and bold patterns can also be distracting. A plain coloured sheet or blanket to play on will help your baby to focus attention on objects, pictures and toys that will encourage development.

The first few months at home

At birth babies' senses of touch, smell, taste, and hearing are well developed—vision is less mature and develops rapidly in the first year. Most babies can look at and

follow a moving object before they reach the date they were due to be born.

At first babies pay attention most easily in soft light, but for vision to develop properly they need enough light to see shapes clearly. Exposure to moderate light in the day and darkness at night helps babies to gradually adjust their daily pattern until they sleep more at night than by day.

Young babies like variety and find faces very interesting. Encourage your baby to gaze at your face as you talk or sing to him/her. Talk as you approach and wait for your baby to listen and look for you. Copy any sounds and noises your baby makes. In this way they begin to understand about communication. Talking helps babies to realise that language is part of their world and they can join in. Using short, easy-to-understand words and sentences in a sing-song voice helps infants tune in and listen.

Although young babies can get bored, they are also easily over-stimulated—yawning, hiccups, fussing, paleness, floppiness, stretching movements, or turning away may indicate that your baby needs a break.

At first babies cannot co-ordinate looking and touching but they will soon start to swipe at dangling objects (for example on a play frame) and will occupy themselves for a little while doing this or by playing with their own hands. They will enjoy sitting in a baby seat and watching what is going on.

Baby massage can be a beneficial experience for you and your baby. Ask your health visitor for information about local classes to get you started. Remember to let your baby have some playtime on his/her tummy every day.

The middle of the first year

From about three months (corrected age) babies interact in a more robust and playful way. Over the next few months they begin to sit, at first with support, and play with objects, reaching out to pick them up, swapping them from hand to hand, banging, and mouthing them.

Babies learn about the shape, texture, weight and colour of objects before knowing the words for them. Fill a basket, bowl or box with objects of different shapes, made from different materials such as cloth, wood, and metal, for your

baby to explore while sitting on the floor. Even at this early age babies will look at picture books with you.

As your baby progresses to spoon and finger feeds, meal times can be another opportunity to encourage attention—wait for your baby to make eye contact with you before giving each spoonful and reward him or her with a smile and gentle praise.

The second half of the first year

As babies learn to sit they will hold two objects and bang them together and will enjoy playing games with you that involve hiding one thing under another, building and knocking down towers, rolling a ball. A set of nesting cups can be used for many playful purposes.

Encourage your baby to imitate gestures and sounds, and to take turns (for example playing “peek-a-boo”). It may be helpful to have only a few toys out at a time, encouraging your baby to examine and experiment with each one. You may need to be actively involved to keep attention focused, sitting with your baby and showing pleasure in what he/she does.

As babies get toward the end of the first year, toys that involve stacking and posting are fun and keep attention. Singing songs, especially those with action rhymes is another activity to do together—encourage your baby to anticipate what comes next. Continue to read and look at books, naming objects and characters as you point to them.

When your baby starts to be on the move

It is very exciting to see your baby moving about and exploring more widely but it is still very important to encourage him or her to concentrate on other activities.

At this stage babies babble and may even say mama or dada to the right person! They begin to understand words. Encourage your baby to look at you when you speak to him/her. Name objects and pictures clearly and encourage your baby to point at them.