

baby brain boosters

What your infant really needs to get a head start

BY ▶ JULIE MEHTA

Nine-month-old Sasha can't yet talk, but her mother is already considering enrolling her in a Chinese-language program for infants. "It may not boost her IQ," says Sabrina Smith of New York City, "but I think it would make her more clever and bright and worldly."

Whether you hope to make your newborn more cultured, improve her future test scores, or actually raise her IQ, you face a confusing barrage of research and advice on the best ways to nurture baby's brain.

"What the brain is doing in the first year is making a huge number of connections," says Diane Bales, Ph.D., an early childhood specialist with Better Brains for Babies at The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. These connections between brain cells are called synapses and trillions of them are formed. Synapses that are used will remain, and those that are not will wither away during childhood—a process called pruning. "Babies are born with connections that take care of basic survival needs, but a lot of others aren't made yet, because they're at least partly based on experience," Bales explains.

So what can you do daily to enhance these connections and increase brainpower? "Having positive, enriching experiences is most important—exposing babies to things that are new and different," says Bales. "And it doesn't have to be expensive. It can be as simple as going to the grocery store."

Here's a quick guide to what's known about boosting a baby's intelligence and development—what really works and what's simply entertaining.

Classical music soothes some babies, but it may not boost their IQ.



BREASTFEEDING “Studies show breastfeeding is the best form of nutrition for infant brain development,” says Tanya Altmann, M.D., a clinical instructor at Mattel Children’s Hospital at UCLA and editor of *The Wonder Years* by the American Academy of Pediatrics. “But if you’re unable to or choose not to, there are many formulas specially designed for brain development.”

These formulas contain DHA and ARA, fatty acids occurring naturally in breast milk that are important for brain and eye development. Formulas should also be supplemented with iron, which is required to maintain enough oxygen-carrying blood cells to foster brain growth. To give your baby the greatest benefit, experts recommend exclusive breastfeeding (no formula or food) for six months and continued breastfeeding up to a year.

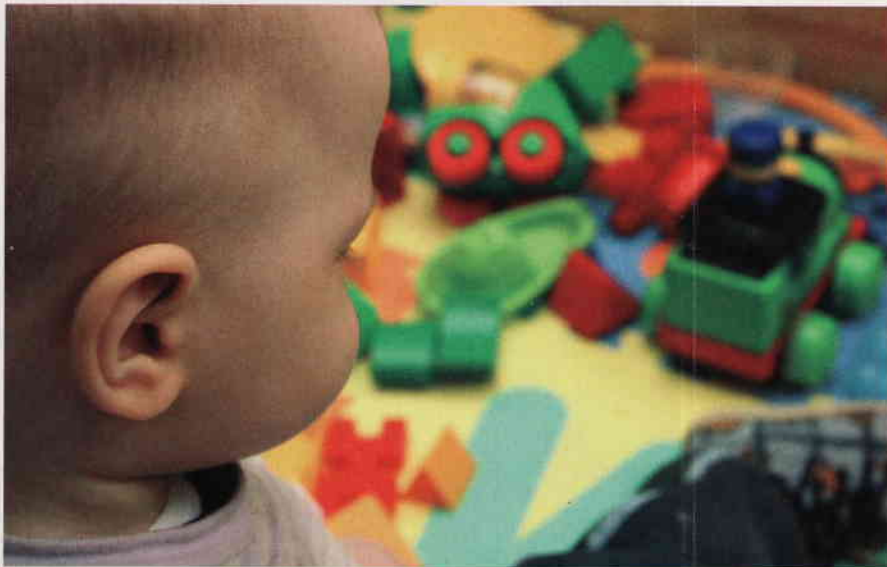
TALKING AND READING Probably the simplest and most effective thing you can do to promote brain development is talk to your baby. “One of the biggest predictors of reading skills when entering kindergarten is oral vocabulary,” says Bales. Talking to your baby helps even before she can understand or respond. Jennifer Shu, M.D., a pediatrician in Atlanta and co-author of *Heading Home With Your Newborn*, suggests, “Parents can narrate what they’re doing—like ‘now I’m emptying the dishwasher.’ It sounds boring to us, but over time babies come to understand patterns of sentence structure and tone of voice.”

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Reading aloud can be especially effective. “Studies show that kids who are read to from an early age take more interest in reading and do better in school,” says Altmann. And repetition is important. “Reading the same story over and over again can help strengthen connections in the brain,” says Bales.

FOREIGN AND SIGN LANGUAGE While Smith ponders baby Mandarin class, she and her husband have already started reading and speaking to daughter Sasha in French as well as English. Babies in bilingual households can easily pick up both languages at the same time. But experts agree that to be effective, a baby’s foreign language exposure should come through a parent or nanny rather than a language tape.

get ready ▶ parenting



But don't expect your baby to start saying *hola* anytime soon. Putting together thoughts in any language takes time. "Babies can understand things before they can get thoughts across to you," says Dr. Shu. In the meantime, you can try signing. "Signs give them another way to

express themselves," she explains.

Some parents use established signing systems while others make up their own gestures for simple requests like "milk" or "diaper change." Experts stress the continued use of verbal communication so your baby doesn't become reliant on the signs.

CLASSICAL MUSIC Each night, 20-month-old Elliot falls asleep to the sounds of Mozart, Beethoven, and other classical composers. His mother, Stephanie Silberman of Hollywood, FL, says she uses the music because of its complex tones and melodies and because it's soothing. But other parents hope classical tunes will enhance brainpower.

"There's no evidence that just playing CDs is going to make babies any smarter, but it certainly doesn't hurt anything," says Bales. Experts encourage singing and playing music of any kind to relax and connect with your baby. Because brain pathways are formed through exposure, early experience with music can set the stage for lifelong appreciation.

EDUCATIONAL VIDEOS AND TOYS Smith occasionally uses the popular *Baby Einstein* educational DVDs, to keep Sasha entertained while she checks email

or takes a shower. But the jury is out on media of this sort. "The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time under age two, and that's hard for a lot of families," says Bales. She says there's no good indication that simply watching so-called educational videos increases brainpower and stresses the importance of direct interaction between parent and child.

Colorful toys and decorations that promise to improve your baby's spatial relationships or hand-eye coordination abound. And while they may provide the type of stimulation that encourages brain connections, much cheaper alternatives can work just as well. "Even with all the high-tech stuff, babies love empty water bottles and pots and pans," says Silberman. "You should see the look on Elliot's face when he stacks up nine blocks."

No matter how you choose to stimulate your baby, experts warn

against overdoing it. "Think about if you were going to a conference and went to 12 sessions in a row—how much would you get out of it? In the same way, babies need a chance to absorb what they're exposed to," says Bales. Pay careful attention to cues from your baby—such as crying or looking away—that show he has probably had enough.

"There's so much pressure on parents nowadays to make sure children develop to their fullest potential," Altmann says. "But studies show the most important thing parents can do is spend time with their infants—talking or reading or getting down on hands and knees and helping their babies crawl and roll around, clap and cheer, and laugh."

And that doesn't cost a dime. ▀

Julie Mehta is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Woman's World, Current Health, and Guideposts. She lives in New York City.

BRAINY RESOURCES

- *Heading Home with Your Newborn: From Birth to Reality*, Laura A. Jana and Jennifer Shu, M.D.
- *The Wonder Years: Helping Your Baby and Young Child Successfully Negotiate the Major Developmental Milestones*, American Academy of Pediatrics, Tanya Remer Altmann (Editor)
- *Baby Read-Aloud Basics: Fun and Interactive Ways to Help Your Little One Discover the World of Words*, Caroline J. Blakemore and Barbara Weston Ramirez
- *Baby Sing & Sign: Communicate with Your Baby Early—Learning Signs the Fun Way through Music & Play*, Anne Meeker Miller, Ph.D.