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Introduction

If you are a caregiver of babies who range in age from birth to fifteen months, this book is for you! We know your days are often isolating as well as physically and emotionally exhausting. The recent public-awareness campaigns about new research into how the brain develops and the importance of the early years in the child's lifelong development may create more questions for you from parents as they leave their baby in your care.

The potential for learning and development is dramatic during these first fifteen months of the baby's life. It is important that you have a basic understanding of what current thinking tells us about how babies develop. Equally important is your ability to translate that information to parents through the activities that you provide for their child. This book is meant to be a resource to help you do just that.

With the unfolding information about the brain, we now know that genetics ("nature") and environmental interaction ("nurture") both have an impact on a child's learning and development. Children are born with all the brain cells that they will ever have, but they lack the connections or "wiring" between those cells. The interplay between nature and nurture makes those connections in the baby's brain. In a nurturing environment (like your child care setting), a consistent and skilled caregiver (that would be you!) offers activities that stimulate the baby's brain and help develop the baby's senses and personality. So the care you give each baby plays a very big role in how the brain is "wired." When babies are in a negative environment where they are ignored, neglected, and not respected as special and unique people, the impact on their growth and development is serious and lifelong.

In this book, we have compiled a host of simple activities that you can do with babies. These activities are in sync with what we have learned from the research about the brain. From the time babies are newborns, the experiences they take in through their senses build the connections that help them learn and develop. Therefore, these activities are grouped by the development of the five senses, which are key to a baby's learning and growth. Each activity includes a list of the materials (if any) you will need, what you should do or how you should interact with the baby, and a brief explanation of how the activity contributes to the baby's overall development.

We hope the easy format of this book will help you with your daily caregiving and enrich your frequent communication with parents. Since you, as the caregiver, "partner" with parents to encourage their child's learning and development, it is only natural that you will want to share these activities so parents can continue them at home.

We loudly applaud you for the important work that you do. We look forward to the day when our society will acknowledge your work with the recognition and compensation that it deserves. We hope this book offers you a wealth of new thoughts and ideas for your caregiving of babies.

What Are Some Important Areas to Consider When Caring for Babies?

Many caregivers say they chose the job because they simply “love babies.” Love is a valued factor that leads many to enter and stay in the caregiving profession. However, just loving babies is not enough. It’s what you do with those loving feelings that counts. Because you love the babies, rather than just “winging it” when you care for them, you develop your skills and knowledge to best promote each child’s learning and growth. Because parents trust you and the babies depend on you, you think through some important aspects of your caregiving practices. These areas include:

- Setting up a safe and healthy environment
- Engaging and communicating with parents
- Establishing routines and rituals
- Supporting each baby’s developmental journey

Setting Up a Safe and Healthy Environment

Safety is a huge factor in the lives of babies! Thousands of babies are injured each year because of unsafe equipment, materials, and environments. Your local child care resource and referral agency, health department, hospital, fire department, and state or local child care licensing agency are just some of the valuable contacts you can use to prepare a safe and healthy environment for babies. Their resources may consist of checklists, free materials, plenty of technical assistance, and additional contacts. Remember, you will need to increase your vigilant attention to babies’ safety as they grow older and become more mobile.

You can develop a safety checklist by thinking of the places where babies spend their awake and asleep time:

- Baby crib—Is it away from windows and loose window-shade cords?
- Playpen—Is the space between the mesh or slats too wide?
- Walker—Is it in good repair?
- Floor—Is the rug or floor clean? Are the electrical outlets covered?
- Outdoor space—Are there any small objects in the area that could cause choking?
- Buggy or stroller—Can the baby be strapped in easily?
- Diaper changing areas—Is a sink (for washing hands) located close to the changing area?

Engaging and Communicating with Parents

New parents are often pressed for time. They are making transitions in their lives, and if they have other children, they are helping siblings adjust to the new baby. They are looking to you for both support and information. The more parents and caregivers talk *and listen* to each other, the easier it is on everyone—especially the child. Parents and caregivers should talk daily about the baby’s temperament, eating interests, sleep patterns, activity level, and special daily challenges and events. Parents can provide information for the caregiver like, “His grandma is here this week, and she likes to take him on daily stroller rides.” The caregiver can offer valuable information to parents, such as “We played Celtic music today, and your son kicked his legs in rhythm with the music.”

Here are some simple strategies that we have seen caregivers use to keep open the lines of communication with parents:

- Recent pictures of the babies and their families displayed in the baby room
- Pictures of the babies and their families put in a resealable plastic bag and made part of the storybook that is “read” to them each day. (Refer to the chapter on hearing and talking for more about this activity.)
- Digital pictures of the babies as they achieve each new skill (like rolling over) sent via e-mail or given to the parents
- E-mail messages sent to parents at work or home applauding a new skill that their baby has achieved
- A recorded phone message, changed daily or weekly, that summarizes any special events or reminders and that offers parents the opportunity to leave a message for the caregiver
- Bulletin boards and message notepads for parents to write down questions or comments for the caregivers
- Daily updates on a standard form, or in informal notes
- A monthly Saturday morning “Baby Play Day” only for dads and their babies
- Infant massage instructor who is invited to teach both caregivers and parents massage technique
- A “Fix-Up Day” that happens the first Saturday morning of every month. Parents are invited to the home or center to leave a book, picture, or toy for all the children to share, and to personalize any space that belongs to their child (for example, their child’s crib area or cubby). This usually takes parents thirty minutes or less on a busy Saturday, but it has a long-lasting effect for both the child and the parents.
- Parents As Teachers (PAT) or similar parenting programs incorporated as valuable aspects of child care

Each baby in your care is unique. You may need to pay special attention to caring for some children with special needs. A child with a chaotic family background, or one from a cultural background different from yours, may take more of your attention. Many resources are available to help you in these areas—we mention some in the Resources section at the end of this book. You can also start your search for information in specific areas by contacting your local child care resource and referral agency.

Establishing Routines and Rituals

Babies' sense of security and trust in the world is directly related to their daily routines and rituals, which are provided by the consistent caregiver. Babies soon recognize that a voice or song is meant just for them and that it means something special—they are going to be rocked to sleep or played with or held. And how much more reassuring it would be if the same song their moms or dads sang to them at home was also the one they heard from their caregiver! Routines and rituals are great examples of the benefits of parents and the caregiver forming a partnership to reinforce a baby's security and trust. These repeated positive experiences speak to respecting the uniqueness of the individual child and reassuring the baby that, "I am okay, people love me, and I can depend on them to take care of me."

We recently viewed a video on infant massage. In it, we saw a foster grandparent who, from the time the baby was six weeks old, came a few times a week to the child care program to give a baby with special needs an infant massage. We viewed the reaction of the baby at three months old. As soon as the foster grandparent entered the room and greeted the baby, the baby showed signs of anticipation and delight. This is a good example of what we mean by security, trust, and predictability!

In your role as caregiver, take the time to set up routines and rituals for each baby in your care. Ask parents for their help—explain to them that their participation is very important. Routines and rituals change over the first fifteen months of a baby's life, so it is important that you talk with parents regularly. Some routines and rituals will be common for most of the babies in your care—like floor time to help increase their large-muscle development. But, as we have mentioned, most routines and rituals will be unique to the individual baby—special songs, the way each baby wants to be held, the time each baby wants to nap and be fed, and so on.

Security and trust are the foundation for the babies' sense of their own identity. Babies who have safe and predictable interactions will learn and develop—and, research tells us, most likely will do well in school as they get older. It is alarming that the highest turnover in child care staff is in the infant and toddler caregiving area. When a baby experiences four or five caregivers in one year, it is very likely that this little person has experienced repeated stress, anxiety, and unpredictability.

Supporting Each Baby's Developmental Journey

Babies can be very different from one another. One baby cries loudly. Another barely whimpers. Some babies kick and squirm. Others hardly move at all. Some babies are hypersensitive and fearful. Others are risk takers. As we know from brain research, each child's personality is developed through a mix of genetics (what children are born with—"nature") and environmental interaction (what they experience—"nurture"). As a caregiver, your goal, in partnership with the parents, is to nurture the babies' strengths and find ways to help them with their challenges. Simple activities that encourage coping and practicing skills early in babies' lives can help them learn and develop.

The activities in this book are grouped by natural, "brain-wired" areas where you will see regular growth as the baby matures:

- Vision
- Touch
- Language development
- Physical development
- Emotional and social development

Summary

This book explores each area of development that is key in the life of a baby. Each important area—sight, touch, sound, speech, movement, emotions, and social interaction—is covered in successive chapters. In addition to helpful information about each area, you will find many activities that you can do with babies to nurture their development. The activities involve minimal materials and outline simple directions to engage babies.

The services you provide as a caregiver are not only valuable but also critical to the growth of the babies in your care. The potential for learning and development, dramatically demonstrated during the first fifteen months of babies' lives, can be realized with the help of skilled caregivers. We hope this book will increase your understanding and ability to nurture babies' growth—because your work affects children's lifelong development.

Texture Poke Box

Materials

Shallow box with removable lid (1½–2 inches deep)
4–6 pieces of material, each with a different texture
(scraps of fake fur, corduroy, terry cloth, velvet, ridged
cardboard or paper, burlap, satin, soft nylon netting, felt,
textured wallpaper, etc.)

Pencil or pen

Ruler

White glue

Cloth tape

Scissors or craft knife

Cotton balls (optional)

Hint: Place a few cotton balls underneath one or two of the sections of textured material before gluing in place to make them a little puffy.

With a pencil and the aid of a ruler, draw dividing lines on the inside of the bottom of the box and the top of the lid to create 4–6 equal sections. The bottom and the lid should have the same number of sections; the size and basic shape of the box will determine the number and shape of the sections. Cut a different piece of textured material to fit each section in the bottom of the box, and glue securely in place.

Find and mark the center of each section of the lid. Use scissors or a craft knife to cut out a small circle about the size of a quarter from the center of each section. Cover the cut edge of each circle with cloth tape to make it smooth and more durable.

Place the lid on the box and tape the box closed on all four sides.

What to Do with the Baby

- Hold the baby on your lap.
- Poke your finger into one of the holes in the lid of the box and describe what you are doing and what you feel with your finger: “My finger feels something bumpy.”
- Gently help the baby poke one of his own fingers into the same hole. Describe the texture the baby is feeling: “Now *your* finger feels something bumpy.”
- Repeat with the other finger holes.

How This Helps the Baby

Babies are very sensitive to touch, so they enjoy exploring with their fingers. The texture box holds babies’ attention and allows you to repeat words that describe what they are touching. This sensory activity also creates a wonderful opportunity for helping the babies begin to learn about categorization—comparing the feel of one texture to another.