

Happy babies & toddlers

Note: This topic page is written about children aged around 0-3 years, although some aspects will be relevant for older children. It is mainly aimed at parents and carers, but much of the information will also be useful for people who work with young children.

Babies' needs

Babies need love and attention from the day they are born. This is not just to meet their physical needs, such as feeding, changing, bathing, etc. Love and attention from adults is really important for the development of good mental health, that is, the ability to form good relationships and to learn and develop in the best way possible.

There is lots of information available about the physical needs of babies and young children. There is much less information available about babies' mental health, even though it is just as important as physical health. This section will give you some guidance about what helps babies and young children to develop good mental health.

As parents or adults who work with babies or very young children, we have a very important role in responding effectively to help them flourish.

Importance of the early years

The early years are very important for brain development. A baby's brain grows more quickly in the first three years of life than at any other time. Positive early relationships strengthen babies' brain connections that will help them create good relationships with others in the future. Positive early experiences strengthen the connections in the brain that control the skills necessary for learning.

Babies' brains develop best when they are relaxed and enjoying what is happening in their lives. Being stressed, lonely or unhappy is not good for brain development.

Stated simply, establishing successful relationships with adults and other children provides a foundation of capacities that children will use for a lifetime.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (US)

Good parenting and child care

There are three key aspects of good parenting and child care in the early years. They can be described simply as: comfort, play and teach.

Comfort

To feel secure and understood, babies and toddlers need parents' and caregivers' love, comfort and protection. Providing comfort means being warm and physically affectionate and giving reassurance. It also means responding to the baby's needs. To do this effectively you need to try to get to know the baby and see things from the baby's point of view.

The mystery tonic that enables babies to flourish... is responsiveness... the parent needs to respond to the actual needs of their particular baby, not to their own idea of what a baby might need.

Sue Gerhardt

In the first year of life, babies benefit from having continuous, comforting relationships with one or two familiar adults. This is called attachment and is very important for the development of good mental health.

More information

The theory of attachment goes back to the 1950s. John Bowlby put forward the theory that there will be positive benefits to an infant's mental health if they experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with their mother or other close adult. Early secure attachments contribute to: love of learning, sense of self, positive social skills, successful later relationships, emotional understanding, commitment and morality.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1.

Babies who have loving and caring early relationships will have confidence in their caregiver's availability and responsiveness. This helps them feel confident to explore their new world because they know they have a safe person to return to when they need to. By watching and feeling how their carer responds to them, they begin to learn the important skills needed to get on with others. They also learn about how to control their emotions by watching their carer. This leads to them being able to cope better with the stresses and changes we all have in our lives.

Did you know?



Research indicates that it is important for a young child's relationship with their parents or primary caregivers to be sustained and reliable. However, young children can also benefit significantly from secure relationships with other nurturing and reliable adults - this gives the child more experience of developing relationships, which is a skill that will be valuable later on in life. These other early relationships are unlikely to interfere with the strength of the young child's primary relationship with his or her main caregivers.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1.

Play

Play is essential to children's development. It's not just something they do to fill the time! It is their way of exploring and learning about the world. Playing allows children to solve problems and practise skills over and over again in their own time and to develop ideas at their own pace.

Playing with a baby or young child is a very good way of helping them develop a love of learning and an active curiosity in the world. It is also a good way of developing your relationship: giving the child your time and attention demonstrates that you are genuinely interested in them. This builds their sense of self-worth and their confidence to try new things and develop their skills.

Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn.

O. Fred Donaldson

Play is important for developing friendships at an early age, which is necessary for learning about taking turns and sharing. This is an essential skill for life, as well as for play! Play can also be a good way of including movement and physical activity into a baby's day, which will increase good feelings as well as their physical strength.

Teach

This can also be described as setting boundaries and rules. Teaching rules, providing routines and setting boundaries for young children helps them understand and care about others and the world around them. As well as keeping them safe, this also helps them develop a sense of responsibility and helps them understand what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This all helps them to feel secure. It also helps children develop ways of controlling their own feelings and behaviour as they grow up.

Positive parenting

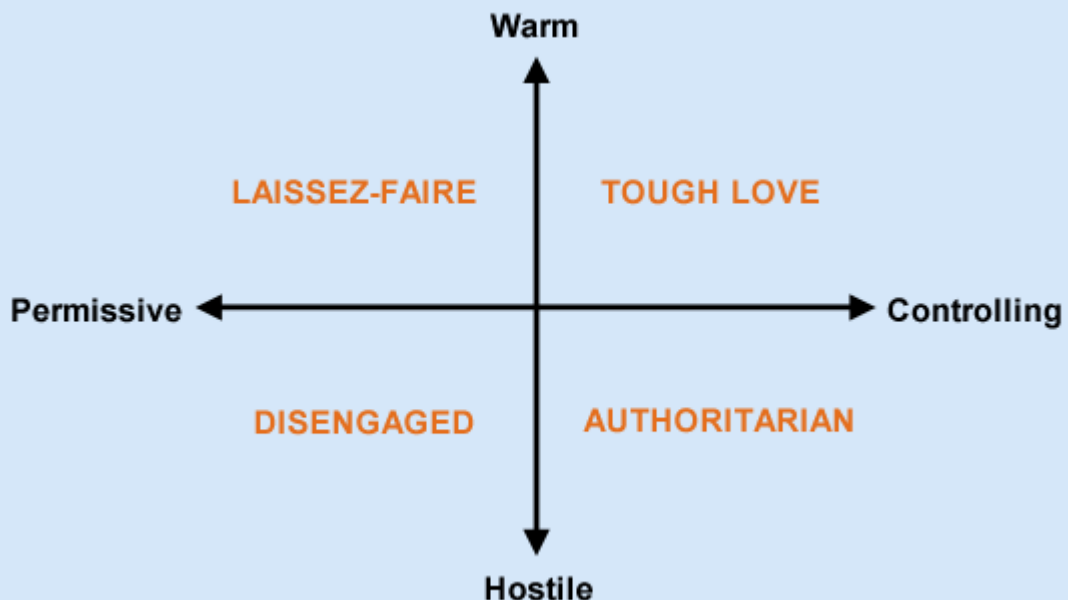
Putting these three key aspects of parenting together (comforting, playing and teaching) will help the young child to feel a sense of belonging and self-worth. This style of parenting is called 'positive parenting' and is associated with significantly better outcomes for children in terms of their character development compared to other parenting styles.

More information

Research has found that parenting is generally made up of two elements. The first has been called 'warmth' (ranging from 'warm' to 'hostile') and the second has been called 'control' (ranging from 'permissive' to 'controlling'). 'Control' in this context is about providing appropriate rules and boundaries. When these two elements are considered together, four different parenting styles are produced.

The most positive parenting style has been called "tough love" and is the style that combines high warmth and high control.

The other three parenting styles are: Laissez-faire (high warmth, low control), Disengaged (low warmth, low control) and Authoritarianism (low warmth, high control), as shown in the diagram below.



Lexmond, J. & Reeves, R. (2009). Parents are the principal architects of a fairer society. Building Character. London: Demos.

For example, a child who has received positive parenting will be more likely to apply themselves to a task, understand others' feelings and deal with stress. They will grow up to have respect for themselves and for others.

Did you know?



Parenting style and parental confidence are very important for a child's potential to flourish. Social and economic factors such as lone parent families and low income households can affect how a child will flourish, however, research has shown that parenting approach and confidence is more important. This means that if a parent confidently offers a positive parenting style, a child living in a household with only one parent on a low income can do well – they can flourish.

Poverty is a factor, but not a central one... I am fond of saying poverty of what? And actually it seems to be poverty of the parent-child experience... that leads to poor child outcomes rather than poverty of a material kind.

Stephen Scott

How to help babies and children develop good mental health

Look after yourself

In order to give your best to the children that you care for, you need to look after yourself. Parenting and caring for babies and young children is one of the most important jobs there is, but it can be hard work. You will be much more capable of *doing* it well and confidently if you *feel* well and confident.

- Enjoy the young child and remember there isn't one right way to be a parent or carer. Try different things to find out what suits you and the child. Don't be too hard on yourself if something doesn't go quite right. See your mistakes as useful – you've learned more about the child and what they don't like and you'll know what to avoid next time.
- Give yourself a pat on the back when things go well, even the simplest things, like the baby settling well. Be proud of your efforts – it's not an easy job.
- Every parent or carer is overwhelmed with feelings and tiredness at times. This is normal. Don't be afraid to ask for some help – even just an hour's break - so that you can have a nap or bath or walk without the baby. This can make a huge difference to your sense of being well and able to cope. Don't feel guilty – we weren't designed to go it alone. Most people like to be asked for help. By giving them a purpose, you will be benefiting their wellbeing too!
- Expect and allow your partner or close friends to look after you as well as helping you with the young child. You need to be cared for too. Tell them what you need, whether it's help with household chores or going out for a coffee or night out.
- If you need advice, ask for it. Every child is different and every stage of development brings new challenges, so there may be times you need advice. And remember, people like to feel helpful.
- Encourage yourself to feel good at *least* once a day. Feeling good is not a luxury – it is a necessity. When you feel good, you will feel more able to cope with stress, you will be more loving and more confident – so you will be a better parent or carer. The source of good feelings is different for everyone so you will have to work out what makes you feel

really good. You might put on your favourite song and have a dance around the room, or have a warm bath or a walk in the fresh air, or prepare something you really love to eat. Or you could chat to someone who makes you laugh or lifts your spirits.

Comfort

- Spend gentle, loving time with the baby/toddler when he is awake. Talk quietly and sing to him. Hold, cuddle and stroke him so he learns to feel safe and loved.
- Look into the child's eyes when you are feeding or holding her. Babies love to look at faces more than any toy!
- Tune into the baby or young child. Watch and listen to their cries and gestures and, with patience, trial and error, try to find out what they mean.
- Respond as much as you can to the baby's cries. This is how she tells you she needs something.
- Try to copy some of the baby's noises or gestures. This may seem odd but it really helps the baby feel you have heard her and that you are responding.
- Talk to the baby/toddler as you do things with him. For example, "let's get dressed now" or "you're going to have a bath now." This will help him to feel involved, and will also help to develop conversation and language.
- Touch is very important for helping a child feel loved and secure. You can stroke to soothe her or tickle to play with her.
- Take time to sit and quietly watch the clouds or a rainbow with the child, or simply the trees blowing in the wind. This may give you both a feeling of calm and a sense of connection to the world around you.

Play

- You can encourage play without spending any money. Outdoors there are puddles to splash in, bushes to hide in, birds and flowers to look at and shadows to be amazed by. Inside you will have cardboard boxes to act as trains or cars, pots to be drums and old clothes to dress up with. All these things will encourage the young child to use her imagination and be creative, which will help her to flourish.

Imagination is more important than
knowledge.

Albert Einstein

- Play together as often as you can make time. This doesn't have to be a specific game. For example, you can chat while they're drawing and ask them about what they're doing. Or listen to music together and dance around the room.
- Take the young child for walks in the pram and talk about what you see around you.
- Try to read with the young child for a few minutes every day. This is not just about learning about words. It is about building your relationship too and is a good opportunity for conversation and warmth and cuddles.

- Encourage early friendships – invite other parents or carers round to your house with their young children or go to a parent/toddler group in your community.
- Give older toddlers space and time to play make-believe with other children. Don't structure their play for them too often.
- Give the young child quiet time to play alone too. Young children need a calm setting, without the TV in the background or a lot of activity, to help them take in the experiences they are having.

Did you know?



Background television has been found to disrupt infants' play by reducing overall play time, making play episodes shorter and less focused. Short play and less focused attention indicate poorer outcomes in the development of thought and language. A recent survey has shown that infants (2.5 months – 24 months) are exposed on average to two hours of adult/pre-teen television per day.

Schmidt, M.E. et al (2008). The Effects of Background Television on the Toy Play Behavior of Very Young Children. *Child Development*, 79(4): 1137-1151.

- Encourage young children to explore and be curious about their world. Just make sure they are safe.
- Appreciate the magic of everyday moments with the young child. Try to see the wonder of the world through their eyes. Things which seem like chores to you can be fun, learning experiences for a young child, for example, preparing a meal, shopping or washing up.

There are no seven wonders of the world in the eyes of a child. There are seven million.

Walt Streightiff

Teach

- Act in the way you want children to act. For example, if you want the young child to be kind, be kind yourself. If you don't want them to shout, don't shout yourself!
- Routine is important to help babies and young children feel secure. The same special toy at bathtime or the same way of being put to bed, (for example, always saying "night night don't let the beddy bugs bite") is often very reassuring for young children. You can also develop family rituals or special family phrases, for example making up words that only your family uses, such as 'huggle' for a hug.
- Don't take good behaviour for granted – focus on what the child does that's good, rather than focusing on bad behaviour. If you give them attention when they're doing something as you expect them to, they will want to keep doing it. For example, say things like "Thanks for picking up your toys – that was really helpful" or "You played really well today – I enjoyed watching you have fun."
- You can use rewards when a child is learning a new behaviour. Make sure the child knows exactly what the reward is and what behaviour they will be rewarded for. Rewards don't have to be gifts or special food – doing something together with the child can be a very effective reward – like playing a game or reading a story.

- Teach the consequences of a young child's actions instead of punishing, shaming or humiliating them. So for example, if a child feeds plasticine to the dog, don't say: "You are very stupid." Instead, you might say, "You mustn't give plasticine to the dog because it will make the dog ill."
- Distract and re-direct a young child's attention from exploring things that you have decided are off limits. Don't punish the child.
- Be consistent. This helps a child feel secure. So, if you have said you will give time out when they misbehave, do it. If you said you will give a reward if they behave well, do it.
- Allow the young child to make reasonable choices and decisions about their day. For example, give them the choice of two different outfits, or two different snacks, or two different storybooks, etc. This helps them begin to take responsibility for themselves. Be careful not to give too many options though, as this could be confusing for young children.
- As far as possible, explain to a young child the reasons for the rules and limits that you have set. For example, don't just say, "you must not hit Peter." Instead, in language they can understand, explain that it will hurt the other child if they hit them.
- Understand that any change of routine can be difficult for a young child even when it's a positive change. Talk them through the new routines when something changes like starting playgroup, moving house, or a new baby or new pet in the family. Notice how they respond to the new experience, let them talk about their feelings and give them plenty of reassurance and affection.

Activities

Here's an activity you could try with young children:

The Hungry Lion Hunt	
<p>Pretending to be animals is easy and fun for most young children. Join in with their make-believe and become a funny, hungry lion on a hunt for something tasty to eat!</p>	
<p>What you need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A carpeted floor will make this activity more comfortable. • A room with plenty of easy and safe places to hide. • (Optional) A pack of cards from a game, each showing a picture of an animal, or a box of small plastic animals. 	
<p>What you do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have them, spread the cards or toy animals on the floor. These are just to help give the children ideas, so it doesn't matter if you can't find any. • Invite every child to choose an animal that they like. They don't have to pick up the card or the toy. The children will need to have their hands free when they pretend to be an animal. • Ask the children to pretend to be the animal they've chosen and to move around the room as if they were that special animal. 	

- After a little while ask them to imagine that all the animals have been invited to a party together. Invite the 'animals' to sit down on the floor and pretend to eat party food in their different 'animally' ways.
- Then say "Oh no! I think I can hear a lion! He's coming to our party to find some dinner! Quick! Find a place to hide!"
- Encourage the children to run and hide and to be really quiet so the lion won't find them.
- Then prowl around as a funny, growly lion, looking for food and sniffing out the hiding animals. When you find a child, sniff and say in a roary way "You don't smell like a boy/girl! What animal are you?" When the child tells you which animal they're pretending to be say: "Oh dear, I don't like the taste of horses (or whatever they are). Why don't you come with me on a dinner hunt?" Then ask the child to follow you, still pretending to be an animal.
- Hunt around in a funny way, finding silly reasons why you can't eat all the different animals, (too noisy, too little, too much fur, or they give you tummy-ache, or earache, etc) until you find all the children.
- End the activity with a snack and a drink for everyone. The lion can say something like, "This is perfect! This is just what I needed! Biscuits taste so much better than animals! Next time I'll eat biscuits instead!"

Some things to talk about together:

- What's your favourite animal?
- If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you like to be? And what would you like to eat?
- What's your favourite place to hide? Why do you like hiding there? Do you like being found?

Other ideas:

- Each time a new animal is discovered, you could ask all the children following the lion to pretend to be this new animal so that they can try being all the different creatures.
- If you're doing this with your own young children they might enjoy you pretending to eat them in a funny and tickly way. You could say "Yummy Yummy, I love tummy!" and pretend to nibble their tummies. Or "What a treat! I love feet!" and pretend to nibble their toes. Make sure everyone is safe, happy and having fun.
- Serve animal-shaped biscuits after this activity so that everyone can have fun eating the animals!