

# Parenting Together

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## The Importance of the Early Years

Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behavior, and health. The experiences children have in early childhood shape the brain and the child's capacity to learn, to get along with others, and to respond to daily stresses and challenges.

The changes that occur in a child's development in the first few years of life are absolutely remarkable. You will witness children's development happen right before your eyes as they begin to smile, laugh, sit, crawl, babble, and talk. Children later begin to socialize and play cooperatively with other children. They acquire important skills to get along with others such as turn-taking, sharing and following instructions, as well as skills that will help them academically such as drawing, counting, reading, and writing.

Early experiences are important in shaping how successful children are later in life. Studies show that children who have quality early childhood experiences, including attending quality early childhood programs, are more likely to graduate from high school, own a home, have a job, and earn a higher income.



Parents, grandparents, caregivers, teachers, friends, and neighbors can play a critical role in helping children develop and start on a path to success.

### Early Brain Development

Here are some important concepts that help us understand early brain development:

- At birth, many newborns start with very similar brains.
- There are “sensitive periods” during a child's development, when the wiring of the brain for specific abilities is established.
- Providing responsive, nurturing, and stimulating experiences establish the wiring of the brain connections.
- Children who are supported and nurtured physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually will develop a multitude of neural connections that will be beneficial throughout their lives.
- A child's interest and curiosity are the motivators that create new connections to acquire new skills. Each new skill builds on a skill already learned. The child's environment can support and enhance his interest and curiosity.
- Early brain development establishes a child's social competence, cognitive skills, emotional well-being, language, literacy skills, physical abilities, and is a marker for well-being in school and life resiliency.

## What You Can Do - TALK, READ & SING EVERY DAY

While there are so many factors that support children's development in the early years, a language-rich environment can be one of the most beneficial. A language-rich environment is one in which children are surrounded by talking (or signing), singing, and reading and have many opportunities throughout their day across all activities to communicate with others and engage in back-and-forth conversations. A rich language environment is important to children's early learning, and can have strong effects on early language, vocabulary, reading, and math skills, as well as on children's social-emotional development. Keep reading for some ideas on how to add more language into children's lives.

### Engaging Children in Conversations

Children benefit from more complex conversations and taking turns in conversations. You can do this by giving children many chances to speak and communicate, asking open-ended questions, encouraging them to think and imagine, and having many back-and-forth exchanges. Here are four key strategies:

1. Encourage back-and-forth exchanges. - Tune into children's interests and experiences and talk about them.
2. Extend children's language. - Expand on children's words or their attempts at words by adding a little more. For example, if the child says "dog," you can say "the brown dog is running!"



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3. Invite children to talk about what they are doing. - Ask children questions about what they are doing, what they did before, and what they plan to do next.
4. Encourage higher-level thinking. - Explain your thinking process. Introduce new concepts or ideas.

Other things you can do to cultivate more language in children's lives is simple things like:

- Asking children questions - "What are you doing?," "How did you do that?," "What do you think will happen when....?" are all great examples.
- Expand on children's speech, add more, and use interesting words - For example, if a child says "I like that" you can say "I like that green and yellow tractor, too!" Or when a child says "big tree" you can say "yes, that tree is ENORMOUS!"

### The Book Nook

Crafty Llama  
by Mike Kerr

Animales Americanos a mano  
by Guadalupe Rodríguez

Beautiful Oops  
by Barney Saltzberg

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### References

Importance of the Early Years

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Talk, Read and Sing Together

<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/early-learning/talk-read-sing/preschool-en.pdf>

Child Development and Early Learning

<http://www.factsforlifeglobal.org/03/>

