

December
2006

Childcare and children's health

An information sheet for parents

Conversations with Babies

Many parents have experienced the wonder and joy of their baby's intense first searching stare, and we all know the pleasure of a baby's early smiles. In the past these have often been dismissed as 'wind' or coincidences imagined by parents. But recent research into brain development has provided new insights into the complexity of early life. It is now understood that babies are not passive or chaotic little beings but they have more complex abilities and needs than were previously assumed. The research shows that experiences in infancy and early childhood are very important. It has also shown that babies have social needs for interaction and communication.



Perhaps one of the most surprising findings is that babies really do communicate from birth. Early communication is dominated by the baby's immediate needs, for food, comfort and sleep. It's easy to understand that a crying baby is communicating these basic needs, but even young babies are communicating more than this. It is now being recognised that babies can engage in 'conversations'.

When babies 'talk', their communications can be remarkably similar to the patterns and interactions of adult conversations. Though their conversations are not word-based, babies use a range of sounds, gestures, mouth/tongue movements and facial expressions to communicate. With support from adults, babies quickly learn the turn-taking interactions of conversations: 'talk', pause for a response, then 'reply'. These 'conversations' not only give babies pleasure, they help longer-term language development. There are other developmental gains, too. Attachment between parent (or carer) and baby is strengthened when meaningful communications, including conversations, occur.

Conversations don't occur without the participation of both baby and adult (or older child). Babies need support in their attempts to communicate, and conversations need to be both baby-centred and responsive to their individual needs and capabilities. Initially it may seem strange trying to have a conversation with a baby, but the following tips may help:

- Being face-to-face, with eye contact is needed for a conversation
- Take turns to 'talk' and allow the baby time to 'reply'
- Follow the baby's lead for a 'topic' of conversation. If for example he or she is indicating interest in a rattle, talk about the rattle
- If you're stuck for something to talk about, ask the baby which toy they like, or demonstrate and talk about the toy
- Copy and exaggerate the sounds made by the baby, as well as 'real' talk
- All routines (bathing, nappy change, feeding, etc) provide opportunities for a conversation
- Babies love routines and game-playing, and will quickly come to anticipate a regular conversation time or activity
- Conversations should only continue for as long as the baby remains interested
- Conversations do have developmental gains for babies, but approaching them as fun will be more productive than if they are treated as lessons.

Above all else, conversations with babies should be fun – for both participants!

The mother of a 4 month old baby expressed her delight at baby conversations:

"I didn't realise you could have a 'conversation' with such a little baby. Now at change time, we take 'turns'. I watch for 'her turn' – she wriggles and coos. When it's 'my turn', she goes completely still and just listens – it's amazing."

This Parent Fact Sheet is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.econnections.com.au

An initiative of



CENTRE FOR
Community
Child Health



The Royal Children's
Hospital



Australian Government
Department of Families,
Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs

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Good Nutrition

What children eat is fundamental to their health, growth and development. In Australia, we are fortunate in having a wide range of foods available and many children experience the pleasures of eating foods from diverse cultures. But not everything children eat contributes to their health, and choosing food that fulfils children's nutritional needs can be challenging.

Guidelines for good nutrition

The following guidelines are recommended by Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NH & MRC) to promote healthy growth and development for infants and young children, through good nutrition:

- Breast feeding is a perfect food for infants and has immediate and long-term health benefits
- Children need a wide variety of nutritious foods including vegetables, fruits, cereals, dairy products and lean meats, poultry and fish
- Children's food should be low in added salt and sugar
- Fat intake, especially of saturated fats, should be limited in children's food.

Note: Low fat diets are not suitable for infants.

Reduced fat milk is unsuitable for children younger than 2 years.

Basic food needs for children:

- Protein from fish, poultry, meat (or substitutes) and dairy, to build their bodies
- Vegetables and fruits to provide vitamins, minerals and fibre. Note: fruit juices are not recommended as they have high sugar levels and may lack fibre
- Starchy carbohydrates, from whole-grains for example, are needed for energy
- Good (unsaturated) fats, including fish and olive oil, are essential to good health and build brain and nerve cells. Saturated fats and 'trans fats' (often listed as partially 'hydrogenated vegetable fats') should be avoided.
- Water. Water is a better nutritional choice than juice and tap water containing fluoride has health benefits that are lacking in bottled water.

Additional considerations

Obesity and overweight has become a serious problem affecting about 25% of children in Australia. Obesity is not just a result of overeating, but the large food serves and foods with high fat and sugar levels contribute significantly to weight problems. To help children develop good eating habits, consider the following:

- Quantity of food is important. Offer small portions, with 'seconds' only if required
- Children go through growth and activity spurts and these affect their appetites. As long as they are offered a range of nutritious foods, a healthy child's appetite can be trusted to determine how much they need to eat
- Many 'fast-foods' have little nutritional value but have high fat, sugar and salt levels. Children may develop a taste for these, making other foods seem unappetising
- Try offering 'special', healthy food, such as seasonal fruit, as an alternative to sweets and fast foods for birthday parties and other celebrations
- Children's tastes change over time. New foods may need to be offered several times before the child will accept tasting it
- Involving children in preparing food can help to develop their interest and understanding of healthy food choices
- Attractive presentation of healthy foods may help encourage fussy eaters.



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